

Sekhmet, Asleep

by
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Dyjan Publishing.

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CUKOLORIS

*Man would learn to be good
if filled with lesser evil deeds.*

Prologue

Panthers stalk the ruins of London.

I've watched them, sleek black bodies melting into the grey rubble, stalking small animals. I've stared eye to eye with one of them, a woman in a beast's form which could have, but never did me harm.

I have walked from what was once England to what once was France. Strange to consider that, the act of walking where an ocean was.

Well, anyway, since I am confessing here, since I am talking here, to you, I could obscure of course but you told me once nakedly all words conceal themselves. And of course, you know what I am talking about.

The Infinite Sea.

Your people invented it, you and yours perfected it and now you walk across worlds the way we once crossed deserts. And you, in your infinite mercy invited me to see the grandeur that was once England or France or deserts beyond the mountains of Italy.

You even named them. You named them.

You.

You rattled on about the history of these places where panthers walk, where great beasts still roam as if discussing the weather with me. You casually mentioned how all Cymralis, my home, my world was now nothing but a province of your empire, how all the endless deserts, all the black jungles nestled beside our dark canals were nothing more than a fragment of your dominion.

You condensed the history of five thousand years to an

afternoon and condensed my world to something you could hold in your hand as if you knew everything about me and mine as if spending ten seasons were enough to make you a god in my lands.

I have stared into the panther's eyes and seen great empathy there. When you look to my eyes old friend, *you will not*. Nakedly these words they do condemn.

I.

Aido Hwedo sat in his chair and watched the dark wine canals bleed away like the thin fingers of an outstretched, seven-fingered hand.

He sat beside the ancient pillar of Yth-Raum where it was recorded the history of the land, going back forever. And before forever?

None could say.

Elim Sarryas the judge was down by the water's edge delighting a group of children with some toys from the Dominion of his homeland.

Elim was a broad, large-bodied man, his skin burnt a crisp bright tan brown from the heat of the green sun overhead and its blue compatriot which hadn't yet risen but would in the next hour or so.

Hour. Aido spat at the word. It wasn't that the word itself was abhorrent but now it was a standard measurement of time. Even his name was not his name. His family had chosen it from a mythology of the judge's world and though the mythology was not common to the Dominion the fact that it was needed at all unnerved him. He could have chosen another but by now this was his name.

Aido Hwedo.

It bit into him and bled into him like a secondary logic's skin and to remove it would be to remove part of himself even if

he felt the name inadequate the man.

The judge retired by now and went walking up the slow rise to where Aido sat.

"I thought it was you," he said.

Aido smiled, (a human gesture,) and almost bowed, another human gesture.

"It is me, and only me," he said in reply.

"You have been off-world?"

"Yes, briefly."

"I thought as much."

"How would you know?" Aido asked.

"The pendant about your wrist. It's white coral. I see you have attached it to an ancient piece of cloth. You must have visited London again."

"Yes. I was fascinated by those ruins."

"What is that fabric attached to the coral?"

"This is but the thread of an ancient time."

The judge sat upon the scarlet stones and stared across at the green sun. By now one could almost hear it screaming. It was an illusion of the special properties of the Infinite Sea, how creatures like Elim travelled. Those who used the Infinite Sea repeatedly would begin to notice certain stellar phenomena as much by some auditory hallucination as by sight.

At night the three moons, Xalheru especially, would seem to sing some plaintive wail like . . . there was a word for it. Ban-sha. No. Banshee. Aido had heard the word before, some scrap of a mythology those of the Dominion recited as a metaphor. His people, the cymryeth, if they had a word comparative to this creature Aido did not know it.

Yet another reason for his hatred of the man.

The symbol of the Dominion whom he hated secretly.

"Any reason why?"

"Your people came from those ruins, did they not?"

"Some. Others came from the colonies of Zheng He, and others from the fleet of Abubakari. Our Dominion is of many places, many sources."

"Yet London is ruin. Paris is a desert. These were centres of commerce now gone."

"There was a war. I needn't tell you."

"No," Aido said with a quiet defiance in his voice, "you needn't tell me. I know."

At this, the judge remembered he had places to go to and rose. Aido did not stand to say goodbye but smiled, extended his hand, and the two men left.

Seemingly on good terms.

Elim Sarryas was a descendant of many lands.

The Dominion of his home had become both powerful and wealthy due to the influx of so many different nations arriving at one spot.

If one traced his lineage, one would first notice Zheng He, (though the man being a eunuch could not father children himself.)

In the early 14th century Zheng He's fleet had been sent east, passing the islands of Japan, clinging to the northern shores to arrive at another frozen realm, previously unknown. Venturing south along the edge of this new continent Zheng He's fleet encountered entirely new peoples never before known by the Chinese.

At the same time, explorers were coming west from Europe.

The empires of what was England, France, and Portugal sent their explorers, men and women who were ordered to break the monopoly of trade which the Khwarazm held and which they had held for two centuries after their victory over the Mongols in the 11th century.

So as the Chinese were exploring the western half of the new world the Europeans were exploring the eastern half.

And soon enough they met.

In time the Dominion was born, a collective, a pooling of resources, and the emergence of new nation-states which gradually became two entities, the Dominion of Aca Nada, (meaning “nothing here” in a foreign dialect,) and the Republic of Typhon.

But Typhon was no longer a threat upon the universal stage.

And now the Dominion had crossed beyond one sphere or horizon and held more than any could have imagined just two generations before.

So, Elim Sarryas was a child of many lands, some of which had not even been known in his grandfather’s time. Some of which existed on worlds dreamed of as fantasy just a short century ago.

As he entered his home Elim turned over the events of the day. He had witnessed three duels, two of which had resulted in death and resurrection, the third being a draw. He had observed in the distance the thorn barges sailing along wine-dark canals, (their word for what was simply water the colour of night,) and had presided over two cases of theft. Were he on Temaukel the case would have been solved by slither-dog, (his word, a term he would never utter publicly for fear of what they’d do to him,) but on Cymralis such creatures could not survive so he was condemned to his judgment.

“The wine of judgment,” he said, then stopped himself.

Where had he heard that?

He crossed the threshold and the anteroom, his shoes lying like the shells of fossilized creatures, went to his bookshelf along the far wall, idly noticed how dark everything looked, (wall and door and even window frame taking on those subtle shades the

cymryeth loved too much,) and ran his finger along the leather binding of his books.

There it was.

The Demon of the Hourglass and Other Stories.

It was a thin red book easily twice the width of his hand and drew it from the others and sat upon his chair, the velvet piece he'd imported from Toronto. The subtle gift of home.

Shifting the yellow-white leaves in his hand he hit upon the correct story after a moment.

"A'Khar'ak," he said the word slowly, savouring the word.

Ah yes, *A'Khar'ak*.

It was the story about a dark world, a dark inversion to how reality was where the night was desired and light scorned, where wealth was abhorred and love a disease. In such a land as this, the wine of judgment was not justice but criminality.

But why had he considered that line at all?

Reviewing the events of the day nothing came to him to make him think of crime nor the murderous violence exemplified in the story.

Then there was a knock at the door and upon the side of it Aido Hwedo waited patiently . . .

II.

"Do we know when?" the detective asked.

Elim Sarryas' body had been discovered in the morning. Due to the nature of the victim, the investigation had been turned over to Asmund Gendrel himself, considered one of the top investigators on Cymralis having been able to solve almost five murders.

This was not because he was a poor investigator but because murder itself was one of the easiest crimes to solve.

Unless an outsider was involved.

"Closest approximation is 15 o'clock," Muscaliet replied.

Cymralis had 30-hour days. Once the cymryeth used a different measurement for time but now all was measured by hours. If one wished they could mention past definitions of time but it wasn't necessary anymore.

"Middle of the night," Gendrel said.

"Yes."

"And yet no sign of struggle. No sign of a break-in. When was the judge last seen?"

"8 PM."

"So, he goes home and sometime later is murdered. But that's a seven-hour window of time. What did our killer do for seven hours?"

"I think he watched," Muscaliet said.

Icara Muscaliet stood over the dead drowned man. Elim had been found in the morning spread upon the floor, face down. His arms and legs had been tied to the floor, special wires used to bind him securely and his face was put before a bowl.

In the bowl was water.

The plain, ordinary bowl had been securely locked to the floor making it impossible to be moved. Even now it was bound so completely that it would never leave that spot.

Water had been tossed from this, obviously the work of the judge himself but it hadn't mattered. He couldn't have kept his head up indefinitely and even had the judge succeeded in removing each drop of water it would have been an absolute and utter ease to refill the bowl again.

"Yes, I think he just watched."

"How long do you figure the judge could have kept his head up?"

"Not long. Forty minutes, maybe an hour. There's no sign of any pressure upon the head, no bruises so our killer didn't push the judge's head down into it. He just waited for him to tire and watched."

“Drowning.” Gendrel almost spat the word. It was one of only three methods the cymryeth knew that caused true death.

The cymryeth were a chimera species, each one possessing within them a secondary biology. In later centuries one might recognize the mechanism of DNA but at the time all that was known was if one died a violent death and waited sooner or later a new person would emerge chrysalislike and this new person would have some memory of their old life and yet not be the person they once were.

For this reason, violent death seldom was mysterious. The victim would be able to identify the killer, especially since this new being would be all but invincible for the first hour or so of life.

As such violent crime was reduced to duels with set parameters for guilt and innocence.

Unless.

One could truly die of old age.

One could die of disease or poison.

And one could die of . . .

“Drowning,” Gendrel spat again, it made no difference to him now, “who would have wanted to do this to Judge Elim?”

“The better question is why. He wasn’t cymryeth. A knife would have worked just as well.”

“Yeah, yeah that’s true.” Gendrel walked over to the bookshelf where there was a missing volume.

He scanned the room and noticed it on the chair.

The other investigators had already cleaned and organized, searching for clues, leaving the two behind with the dead man who was himself about to be deposited and analyzed at a more sterile and impersonal location.

“He was reading this.”

He picked up the thin red book, glancing at the title, and where a thin length of ribbon had been inserted between two

pages.

"Does it matter?" Icara asked.

"I know this story. And yes Icara, one never knows, maybe it matters, maybe it's not important at all. Hmmm?"

"What is it?"

Gendrel stared at the judge a moment then glanced about the room. Two chairs in the corner, dining table between them colour of black salt, window to his left showing the canal below, door to his right leading to the bedroom, bookshelf behind him, Muscaliet before him, (dressed in the loose flowing garments of a native cymryeth although it was clear she was mostly human,) and at his feet the dead man waiting to leave.

"Why here?" he asked simply.

"What do you mean?"

"Our killer could have taken him to the bedroom, there's no window visible to the road or the canal. He could have closed the curtains, but he didn't." He glanced back at the chair and then glanced at the dead man again. "He chose this spot to watch and he did more. He chose this chair."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I think you're right Icara. He was watching but he wasn't just watching the judge. He was watching the room. From this chair he could see outside, could see the front door, could see everything the judge would have seen had he sat here. Our killer didn't just want to watch the judge die. He wanted to watch everything from *where* the judge would have seen everything and seen things *the way* he would have seen them."

With a clipped manner of speech now, a clipped manner of walking he always drew to himself when distracted by some detail the detective crossed the room, then again, observing each angle one could see from sitting in the chair.

Muscaliet had removed the wires from the judge's wrists and ankles during this time. The wires themselves would be

examined for evidence but knowledge of fingerprints did not exist yet and so she would not have known how to check for any such marks upon the faux silver metal.

"It's been moved," Gendrel said finally and going to the chair bent down, glancing at the floor. Then on his stomach, he went exploring the chair legs for a solid minute or so. "Yes, the killer moved it."

"How do know it was the killer?"

"The scratches in the floorboard are fresh as if they were moved back and forth repeatedly, they're too fresh to be more than a day or two old. Our killer wanted the exact right position to observe everything. I'm certain of it." He stood up then. "That's why he waited so long."

"Assuming he did wait all that time. I only said he watched. There's no evidence he watched for seven hours straight."

"No, not seven. But more than five. It's like every twenty minutes or so the chair was moved, just a bit, as if getting the exact perfect angle. Yeah, I'd say five hours, here, watching. Reading."

"How do you know our killer was reading?"

"Because this ribbon is cymryeth in design. And because it's over a thousand years old. I've seen things like this in museums Icara. No one is allowed something like this without some very special circumstances. I know Elim Sarryas. The man was no thief. Our killer left this behind on purpose."

"Why would a killer leave a thousand-year-old piece of cloth, probably worth a small fortune?"

"To mock us," Gendrel said simply.

And what was worse, Muscaliet realized he was probably right.

III.

Amala had worn the mask this time. Aido had insisted on it.

The festival was all in readiness now, the time when the old myths took on the flesh of the real. Once there had been actual wars but these were now fragments of the past condensed to masks worn to officiate holocausts as a summer's entertainment.

Amala wore the mask of an overlord, her features diffused into the copper wood, her beautiful eyes now disfigured into a disgusting grey.

There were several like this, all playing their roles, moving from street to street proclaiming themselves murderers, monsters, and demons.

The last term was not native to the cymryeth. Even here the Dominion had effected change without any realizing it.

Any except Aido himself.

And far away Elim Sarryas' body was being found.

Aido was sure of it.

Even now the dead man was being explored like some lost continent and they would find the cause of death, (he had left the murder weapon behind,) but they would not know who had done this. Or why.

And being an outsider Elim's death was a permanent state.

The street was littered with bodies, all living but not truly alive, at least not alive in Aido's mind.

The cymryeth had been conquered. These were not the people of Cymralis now but shadows, echoes, and reflections only. The true people were the masks and the faces which they wore. Amala was only Amala when she did not look like herself but had taken on the features of an earlier tyrant . . .

"Hello Aido," a voice called behind him, and turning he saw one of the conquerors there.

"Inspector . . . Gednrel isn't it?"

"Gendrel," the man corrected him.

Behind him, a woman stood with gold irises to her eyes but her flesh was not like a cymryeth's, being too pale.

If Amala was not truly Amala, then this . . . thing, was not truly anything at all.

"How can I help?" Aido asked.

"I needed some information and you are the foremost export of ancient cymryeth customs. There has been . . . an accident."

Accident. Accident.

"I see. And is anyone harmed in this . . . accident?"

"No," Gendrel said simply. "There has been a resurrection. No one was seriously harmed."

At this, Aido almost turned a shade of pale himself. All lies of course. No outsider could live again, and even his kind could not survive drowning.

"Why come to me over an accident? How does knowledge of the past affect the present?"

"I am not simply inviting you. There are others. Though, you were quite low on my list."

Low??!

"Low?" Aido asked, pretending a lack of concern.

"Yes. I already have . . . let me see? Professor Iara Cambion from the University of Grootslang, Saithcairn from the Museum of Ijiraq, and . . . what is this name?"

He handed his notebook to Aido who took it.

"Galistig," Aido said slowly.

"Yes, yes, Ms. Galistig."

"I do not know who she is," Aido said.

Muscaliet came forward and tapped Gendrel on the shoulder.

"It's time for us to be going."

"Not now!" Gendrel almost spat out the word, cowing her.

"Don't you see I'm busy? I tell you, one professional to another, these half-breeds are so impolite."

And Aido for a split second didn't know what to say.

"I wouldn't know," he said finally, "I am not half of anything myself."

"Well, we must be going. Meet us at Teliavelis within the hour."

"Teliavelis?"

"Yes, it's where the resurrection took place. The accident-prone individual will reveal all then. Oh, and as for Ms. Galistig, she is no one important. I think . . . let me see. Ah yes, uninformed maid. That was the official term I used. Still, I imagine she's probably as well versed about cymryeth culture . . . as you are."

At this Gendrel smiled, Aido doing the same hated gesture as the detectives left, but just before they did Gendrel turned back.

"Curious," he said.

"What is curious?" Aido asked.

"If you don't know I won't tell you." And then the detective turned and left again.

Out of earshot of Aido Gendrel turned back, once, then turned to Muscaliet.

"Do you think he believed me?"

"What you said about me rankled him, no question."

"Sorry about that."

"Don't be," she said. "Could see it all over his face. He was torn between condemning you and saying several things worse. To me."

"Think it's him?"

"Out of all of them, he was the only one who didn't ask who had come back. And out of all of them, he was the only one who didn't ask what happened. An accident can be anything. I admit it's not proof but it's odd."

“Well in an hour we’ll know. Elim Sarryas will condemn the guilty party.”

IV.

Cymralis, due to its history, is a world of violence that is rarely undisclosed. Killing is not deemed an act to hide, normally, as there are rules even for murder. As such though one knows of certain ways to kill, poison, or disease, they are seldom needed or used. If the rules are fair and the crime is just a murderer may walk away quite freely.

So long as the rules are upheld.

The victim has a choice of weapon, location, and options on how they will defend themselves.

The murderer lays bare his or her reasons for the crime and the duel gives the supposed victim an equal chance to kill him or her, just as the killer has the same chance to do likewise.

As such when a crime of murder is not immediately solved the criminal is deemed more than simply a murderer.

They are deemed insane.

With that information, all the assembled came to Teliavelis for justice.

Teliavelis was a small bare house with several chairs fixed around a centre point where the detective stood.

Professor Cambion, (a human from the Dominion,) was by the window while Aido was next to her and next to Aido Saithcairn. Ms. Galistig occupied the position by the door. Aido knew Cambion, a slender, boring woman in her faux cymryeth garments, and Saithcairn, a native of Temaukel had folded his wings carefully behind him.

As for Galistig Aido could barely make her out.

“I am glad you are all here,” Gendrel said, his voice suddenly changing, becoming more clipped, more formal. It was as if a small switch had gone off in his head and he was now

slightly someone else. "As you know, all except for you Aido, since you never asked, Elim Sarryas was murdered yesterday."

Realizing his mistake Aido stood and addressed the detective.

"I did not want to be impolite," he said simply.

"It doesn't matter. The victim did not name you as the murderer. He named you."

At this, the detective directed all eyes to Galistig.

"You are the criminal, according to Elim Sarryas."

And Aido was surely puzzled by all this.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Elim will come forward in a moment and reveal all. But first I wanted to explain fully why I summoned you all here since it would seem unnecessary. It all comes down to this." And he drew from the table behind him a small ribbon. It was dark in colour, woven of ancient cloth.

"I'm sorry Aido, I never showed this to you but I did show it to you Professor Cambion, and you Saithcairn."

"It is an ancient piece of a garment worn in the Ciwna Age," Professor Cambion said simply, "I already told you this."

"Exactly, oh, you will have to excuse me for a moment. Muscaliet has just arrived with Elim." And Gendrel placed the cloth halfway upon the table and left the room.

Saithcairn's eyes followed the detective as he left while Galistig simply sat, utterly confused herself.

Then she went over to the cloth as it seemed about to fall.

Aido could not understand any of this.

He had been summoned as an expert but according to Gendrel the judge had named this nonentity as the criminal. He had left the cloth behind to mock them, this small piece of the true world, and yet it was being left upon a table haphazardly and surely it had not damned him for many were knowledgeable of it, and yet here he was beside a human and this winged . . . thing.

"So careless," Galistig said as she picked the cloth up and put it back carefully on the table. Yet another pointless act. Was all this for his benefit? Was all this some elaborate deception?

Without thinking he said, "You shouldn't have touched that."

"Why?" the maid asked, and he still couldn't quite make out her features. Was she hidden in some way? The Dominion could hide a form subtly. Was that it? Was it Muscaliet here and not a maid at all?

"It is a sacred object," Aido said.

"It is no sacred object," Professor Cambion said and Saithcairn almost laughed.

"It is a piece of an ancient and powerful history," Aido said.

"And it almost fell on the floor," Galistig replied. Then she quietly returned to her chair as if the fear of being considered a murderer hadn't occurred to her at all.

"What is this nonsense about it being sacred?" Cambion asked. "It is old certainly but it is hardly sacred."

"It is a piece of the past and therefore quite sacred," Aido said hotly. The detectives had not returned yet and Aido wasn't even concerned about the fear of seeing the judge again.

"Yet some damned fool left it in a book," Saithcairn uttered.

"I would hardly call him a damned fool. Surely there was reason behind this."

"Yes, the logic of not knowing what he had."

Saithcairn had risen now, his heels clicking upon the stones. The raven-eyed being bent to look upon the ribbon and had his mouth the ability to move he might have smirked.

"It is a beautiful piece, but hardly important. Whoever left it in that book was indeed a damned fool."

"I would rather think the murderer clever," Aido said.

"How so?" Cambion asked.

"Well, if I were the killer," Aido added, "and I had committed this crime I would have left something as a token, to explain the crime."

"But how does this explain anything?" Galistig asked from the corner.

At that, the detectives returned and with them was a young woman.

"Ah, good, well here is Elim Sarryas newly returned. The resurrection was a complete success."

"That's the woman," the woman said, indicating Galistig, "she was the one who killed me."

"I thought as much. Muscaliet, if you please."

"Of course."

And all the time Aido felt himself trapped in a very bland, very bizarre nightmare.

The young woman rose and Muscaliet put handcuffs on her as she was led out. The other young woman claiming to be Elim Sarryas shook Gendrel's hand as the other two, Saithcairn and Cambion rose, went to the detective, shook hands, and also left.

Finally, "Elim" left as well, leaving Gendrel and Aido alone.

Gendrel sat beside Aido and stared at the ribbon for a time.

"It's rather bland, isn't it?" he asked.

"What?"

"That cloth there. Dark, unimportant, like someone left it behind as an accident."

Accident.

"Elim is an outsider. The woman you brought couldn't be him."

"Hmmm, might be right. Except you know how corrupt

and evil we are. I mean you were there in London, I bet Elim told you the stories."

"He spent a day relating them to me."

"London was burned to the ground by our people and Paris was turned into a wasteland. We crossed the ocean in a moment and devastated our ancestral homes. So, you can imagine a little thing like a dead judge won't stop things from being," Gendrel said, as a coldness etched into his very voice.

"But he is dead," Aido replied.

"Yes. But, through a few simple lies, we can claim that he came back. Give her his identification, his information. Elim Sarryas will live. Simple as that."

"It will be as if he never died," Aido said, his eyes downcast without quite saying why.

"You know, Galistig, she will still be tried. She will be tried and convicted and found guilty."

"Who is she? Really?"

"No one important," Gendrel casually replied. "A cymryeth from a nearby home working at the time of the murder."

"She did not look cymryeth," Aido said and turned to see Gendrel glancing back at him with a hard diamond stare.

"Oh well, maybe I'm just lying to you."

"The others have gone. Why are we the only ones here?"

"Because the case is over. Solved. Thought it would be nice just to talk, you and I for a few moments before we too have to leave. Anyhow, as I said, she will tried, and convicted of the murder of the judge. Perhaps executed, maybe drowned. That is fatal, isn't it?"

"The judge was drowned and yet somehow he has returned."

"Yeah, yeah, you're right. Except I never told anyone how he died. So how would you know?"

"I guessed," Aido spoke quietly.

"And it's not like knowing the exact means of death proves you're the killer." Gendrel stood up and walked to the table, picking up the cloth and then returning. "You know, I told Muscaliet that whoever committed the crime was mocking us, leaving this behind. She didn't understand. Do you understand?"

"It is not right for her to be executed for a crime she didn't do."

"I'm talking about the past, about this cloth, not about crime or supposed criminals. This was left behind to mock us because the killer wanted to leave something absolutely perfect behind, something that really summed up his entire world. Right here in the palm of my hand."

His hand. An alien hand.

"I would think crime is essential to mockery," Aido said.

"Sometimes. Anyway, I think we were being mocked with this, that the killer was saying something as small as this was enough to balance the scales. A true cymryeth committed this crime, an utterly, perfect cymryeth acted. And why kill Elim? Why not kill another judge, a detective, or some civil servant? Because Elim was as close to a cymryeth as anyone could be. He knew the culture, and the people, and was liked by everyone . . . almost everyone. But this here," and he held the cloth to his face, "this was meant to say, 'You will never be enough. You will never be as much a part of this world as I am.' What do you think?"

"I think you read too much into it. Surely his motivation was something grounded in the real."

"No, his motivation was pure hatred. He saw in Elim something he couldn't bear to see in himself. And it doesn't matter anyway. Galistig will be convicted, and executed. She will be known as the one who killed the outsider. Why, in a hundred years she might even become a legend. A *hero*. Now, I've already checked the alibis of Saithcairn, Cambion, and several others, and

my partner and I went to all of them, played the little charade you saw and my partner said you were the only one who didn't ask about the victim, you were the only one who thought of her as less than you.

"Kind of tells me you're someone who is a firm believer in the old ways. So, here are all the facts on the table, and I've told these same facts to a few others and they all passed this test perfectly. Now it's your turn.

"If you are the killer and you killed Judge Elim Sarryas for not being truly as much a part of this world as yourself, if you murdered that man because he wasn't as much as you and throughout thousands of years of history only the most depraved, most mentally unbalanced, most abnormal cymryeth have ever committed a murder and hidden their responsibility of it, then, if you are the killer you must confess to the crime.

"If you are not the killer then this entire conversation is moot. Galistig will be tried but might not even be convicted. Elim might have mercy on her and sentence her to *Earth*. Could you imagine all Cymralis represented across all worlds through her, a *plain, simple* ordinary murderer? Someone you are not of course.

"So, I'll ask it again. Did you kill him or not?"

"I did not kill anyone," Aido spoke simply, quietly, and then rose, as if to leave. He walked to the door, the glint of the suns passing through the window, and then stopped. Gendrel turned to look at him as he passed.

And he heard it then. He heard the soft scream of the sun growing louder and louder, heard it sounding familiar like the way another had screamed days before.

"I am not a killer," he said again, "I am not a killer," he reached for the door, repeating it again and again. "It was not murder, it was justice, it was not murder, it was . . . not justice, I am not a . . . I am a . . . I am a . . ."

He turned back and sat down on the chair again.

"I have something to confess," he said finally, slowly, letting each syllable escape himself at last as if he were being hollowed out with each word said. "But first tell me this is a sacred thing. That they were wrong. That this in your hand is sacred and worth killing for."

"This? This is something I took off my grandfather's winter coat from home. The piece you left, it's in evidence. This is nothing special.

"You just never noticed it."

I AM YOUR DEATH PERSONIFIED

*Don't think elsewhere is paradise.
All places are hell if given time.*

Prologue

You smiled at me. Each day and every day you glanced at me. Smiling. How many have you seen? How many have you glanced to, smiling all the while?

How many?

And when I was accused by you of jealousy, I could say nothing, there was nothing left to say. Words and deeds are dead.

Words and deeds are dead.

And I am your death personified.

I.

Formicaleon turned it over in his mind.

Enfield was nestled by the corner of the room and behind her embedded in the walls the scenery beyond. The strigari being a species now adapted to flight could not live in small rooms nor usually could they ever hope to. As such it was hell to come into places humanity occupied, subtle torture to fold one's wings away.

Eventually, this would change, had changed in some cases. A few strigari had departed to other lands far from the isles of home and had learned the breaking art of standing in a room, so much so that it seemed almost normal to them.

But beneath the surface, they might well be breaking.

Or broken.

As such the walls did not exist. Instead, the walls were an invisible construct. One could not see them and so perceptibly they did not exist. One was greeted by endless surf, the grey-bronze shores of endless islands and sounds of gull women

singing.

Formicaleon, had he wished, could have placed little human doves at every mile his eye could see. Did sometimes. Yes, sometimes he crafted little white-winged women, naked of course, as much for their cultural mores as his lust, but just as often did not.

Today was one such day.

Xiiona had gone to give birth. His partner, professional of course, was all prepared. He turned her pregnancy over in his mind, the clinical logic of new life.

And its absence in his.

He stared at the letter again. Maryann had written to him. He suspected this. No. He *knew* this. She had not come with him to Temaukel, had not wished to leave the Dominion, to go past the boundaries of Ottawa. Ottawa. He recalled the city in his mind, five million souls clustering at the heart of the empire, Mandarin uttered on each street, or Huron or the tongues of Mali, and now added to them cymryeth, strigari and the languages of Hetemit.

And yet though she heard the words their music always eluded her.

She said she would wait, and he, though not believing her, accepted her word as law. Not law. Wrong word. As *truth*. But he always knew the actual truth when he heard it. It was one thing to believe, and quite another to consider a certainty.

Now he was alone with Enfield in the corner, the strigari in flight across the isles or some such nonsense, (actually was their time of mating and so to him, it was nonsense because he was barred from it in all respects of the word,) and there was not even a case to occupy his mind.

Not even a fucking case.

He rose from his desk, sound of surf about him and spoke to the walls. Instantly there appeared a mirage of black bodies, raven women. They scoured, no, no, no, what is the word? They

bled across the sky, yellow-eyed women with raven wings for hands, broken songs like rattling bones stitched along black continents and he marvelled at them or tried to.

Or tried to lust upon them.

The strigari were closer to human now and with Maryann no longer in the picture he was alone. The weight of his years was pressing down upon him now. It sometimes happened that one found companionship among the various inhabitants of the Dominion. Perhaps a generation ago it would have been taboo but no longer. He even knew of one couple, a human male and an abarimon woman. In her valleys, the air was sweet, to her, mostly because it was composed of carbon monoxide and little else.

To him, the valley was death as the lands beyond were death to her. Imagine their mutual surprise to find them spending time together along the edges of their realities, until one day, quite unexpectedly he proposed.

And even more unexpectedly she accepted.

Armour was constructed for him to venture to her valley, opposite armour built for her to leave and scour the fields beyond and the last Formicaleon heard the pair had adopted four children, three sons of Earth, one daughter of Aboria, and were quite content.

He envied them.

Of course, there was Xiiona. She was unmarried.

Perhaps . . .

Would he wish to raise a child not his own?

Better a child not one's own than no child at all he reasoned, then whistled and Enfield pricked up her ears.

"Time to get out of this maze," he said, and the pair left the now empty room to the endless shores beyond.

II.

Wintek was the capital of Temaukel and it was this which humanity had built for itself. Nestled upon the largest island was the human threshold, an outreach into alien lands. To the strigari this was also an invasion though the invasion was as beneficial as it was unwarranted.

The Dominion of Aca Nada had stumbled upon Temaukel after first reaching Cymralis. The strigari, in the beginning, had not been as they were now. Temaukel was not as it was now.

Passing streets of stone Formicaleon glanced up to see the strigari often in flight and across the waters, upon the waters were fishers casting their nets. Two generations ago, the reverse had been true.

They had been preyed upon by those things of the ocean.

Before humanity arrived the strigari did not look like birds. These were a human attribute which they took and made their own. Instead, they had looked like inaldi-snails of moonstone shells or flies, or spiders. There was no singular genus of strigari, no single race. Humanity had ventured upon a planet with small creatures, some like snails with their luminescent pale bodies encased in their armour or little ice-winged shapes, not even forms, just bundles of wing and eye.

And others wove their subtle webs to trap a few at a time.

But the ocean beyond was littered with giants.

Great sharks once roamed these waters the size and length of a broad city street, just like the street he walked on now. The islands were small and the creatures would have to drink. Unlike Earth, the ocean was fresh with not even a drop of salt in it so the creatures would have to come to the ocean to drink.

And there the giants would feed upon them all.

Then one of the strigari, and it is uncertain who, took a piece of man into itself and thus began the change in all of them. For the strigari could feed upon aspects of other living things, add

to themselves little details of other lives until those other lives were theirs partially, then utterly.

So first one then another fed and slowly this permutation spread throughout the species. And then they discovered other forms of life on Earth.

Over a generation the strigari went from crawling along the ground to sailing the air and even those things like flies were granted new and stronger wings with which to soar and now none were bared the upper air but all the scan of blue above was as intimately theirs as the seas below, though even after their metamorphosis some still held the inaldi-snail pattern on their backs, the spiralling tattoo of their time ages ago when they had neither hand nor bones but only shells of moonstone to clothe them by.

As for the giants they either died or fled.

At times Formicaleon hoped they had simply fled. Why had they not taken the aspects of the giants unto them? Ah, but there is the paradox you see, for if they fed upon those beasts they would become beasts and if they took in fragments of their predators they would become predators and stalk not other monsters but creatures once like themselves. The choice would be to either be a killer or a victim with nothing in between.

As such the arrival of humanity signalled a new dawn in their history.

As Formicaleon walked he watched Enfield. The dog sniffed the air, her grey-sleek body alert for any signs of guilt. Enfield had been assigned to him and with her, the questions of guilt or innocence, or rather of finding one or the other fled away. She knew intimately if one were guilty and what they were guilty of. This was because of the volpurn.

The strigari held within them suspended as a seed of pure consciousness a virus. This virus allowed the accumulation of lives to take place but it also held a subtler logic written into it.

Rarely, and this is crucial, *rarely* the volpurn would allow one to read another, their language, their mood, and their being. Though all were possessed of the volpurn only a fragment of that number could use it in this way and even fewer still could understand what they read. But dogs could. For some reason, if given to dogs the volpurn had a finer chance of taking hold.

But only on Temaukel.

If Enfield ever left the planet she would die. And since Formicaleon was now bonded to her, bound to her he too was exiled here. She was the chain keeping him in lockstep with life on Temaukel only. Yet if Maryann had only come this would have been no prison to him.

Enfield stopped.

Formicaleon stopped too, his dark hair like the eye of a shadow in a sea of white. He stopped then almost laughed. Of course. If a strigari were looking down right now his hair would seem like some raven's eye staring up at them, a circular black dot observing above and unseeing simultaneously. He was finally thinking almost like them or perceiving the world almost from where they now stood upon it.

Enfield stopped. Why had she stopped?

She was staring across the Shallow Sea to a spot of ground. The islands here could be crossed easily. One could simply walk the distance, the waters being no higher than a man's legs. Of course, one would be drenched but amidst a world ocean with a hot sun overhead and an eternal summer all about some simply crossed from isle to isle not seeking any destination at all.

Merely to stay cool in the act of being.

Formicaleon instead got a boat and ten minutes later the pair were rowing over to the nearby island.

III.

The shore was rocky with soft beaches scattered, the island no larger than five hundred feet from one edge to the other and there was a small mansion high above upon a cliff. This was a human place. Nor did strigari ever walk here.

The island was known as Baobhan Sith. He had forgotten by now where he heard the name. It hardly mattered.

Though the island was next to Wintek it could as well have been on another planet. The Shallow Sea was no barrier of course. But where humans dwelled strigari avoided and since Wintek was the capital of this world it was imagined each island in its orbit was itself part of the divine order of home. As such unless invited seldom did one come to these islands reserved for those who sought escape into their private universes.

It was a paradox of sorts.

By being so close it was perceived that these places were under the protection of the Dominion and so were not watched closely. If this island were on the other side of the world Formicaleon would have known each detail of it intimately.

This was an undiscovered country for him, always seen and never encountered. Yet Enfield had drawn him here.

Why?

They had left the rounded barque by now and were crossing the sands when he saw it. When he saw them.

A dead man was lying on the beach as the waves beyond were lapping lovingly about his face. They seemed almost alive, the way a dog would sinew forward and back against the wishes of her master, coming close and parting only to come close again.

The girl was beside him, likewise dead.

She was pale, her hair the colour of a painting of wild corn washed out by rain, her eyes the colour of winter at dusk, staring lifelessly up as if trying to reach something impossible now to grasp. Her dress was a pale white, she was barefoot and her hair

was long. And her throat was slit. As was his.

Knife was there, a slender wicked little blade. Formicaleon turned back to see Wintek but a thousand steps behind him. He then ventured closer carefully, eyes scanning the rocky spires above.

And all the time the two bodies were being gently rocked by the sky-coloured sea, their faces buried in the dust as if lovers in a former time.

He checked the dead man. The wound was old, blood dried. Same as her. For a moment he spoke a prayer, reclaiming any faith which might serve him now. He went to close her eyes and then thought better of it. Something was imploring in them as if even now screaming to be allowed to see. So, he turned her over allowing her face to gaze upward at the sky.

Yet for some reason the man he would not touch.

He moved the girl carefully closer to the rocks but the man with his funeral-black clothes, his eyes glinting from the reflection of the ocean . . . no . . . there was something in him even now the detective did not want to touch.

The knife he picked up and examined.

Serrated, thin needle flattened to a point with shark-spine teeth arrayed along its back. This was an instrument of murder. Enfield shied away from it. She smelled something unclean upon it beyond its use in the committing of two crimes.

He turned his eyes upward and went toward the mansion.

He could have gone back. He could have gone back to Wintek, summoned more to accompany him and returned but if he did and the murderer returned, or worse if the murderer were wise enough to recognize the danger to himself then the bodies would be disposed of before the detective came back. And even with the murder weapon in hand if the corpses disappeared it would be all the harder to prove a crime had been committed at all. For were not these the islands of safety sheltered under the

shadow of the wing of the Dominion?

However, assuming the murderer had not crossed the Shallow Sea, (which was likely because the bodies were still here and had not yet been moved,) then there was only one place for the murderer to go.

He climbed the stone steps leading to the mansion above.

It was a small building upon closer view. He held the suspicion that it had been carved into the stone, that what he saw was only the thin finger of a larger edifice beneath. He, they, came to the great grey doors and pushed them open.

Inside was a gallery.

The gallery was littered with art pieces from across the worlds. Paintings, yes, but sculptures as well, grey basalt statues of Hetemit here and beside them long portraits and tapestries of the cymryeth.

And here, ah yes, he'd never seen such a thing in person before.

Here is a glass case, in the heart of the grey gallery, and within an Iljalna Xirez, a representation of cymryeth resurrection. You'd see etched into temples these rounded beetles each no larger than the palm of a foreign hand, positioned to be seen as if from above.

It was unclear from where the image sprang.

It simply always was.

The sapphire-coloured beetle was nestled in the soft white cocoon of its eternal rest, an insect reclining upon a sea of white silk, moving and immobile, unmoving and yet never ceasing, the stone composed of an azure mercury which flowed the way a living creature's blood might flow. As such though unalive it gave off the appearance of true life and though unthinking gave off the appearance of having the potential for thought.

He was half-inclined to take it from its nest then glanced about at the rest of the myriad creations, considered who the

owner might be and what might happen to him if accused of theft.

Then he thought, and this is an impossible thing to explain rationally, that the murderer might kill this thing too, reach in and crumple this statue like so much half-rotted glass.

He took the Iljalna Xirez and went on his way.

Beyond the gallery were portraits. These differed from the pieces of art because they were all of the same woman and made by the same hand. The woman was blond-haired, pale of eye and pale of form, and was similar to the girl on the beach, but not quite.

The portraits lined both sides of a long corridor and it seemed incredulous for the same painting to be made again and again.

Then he noticed it.

One of the women had a scar along her cheek.

Another did not.

One woman's eye was imperceptibly higher than another. Another woman's mouth was ever so slightly broader. A painter is allowed artistic license, but no, this was not the conceit of the artist.

These were not the same woman.

Under each oval portrait of the silent women were dates.

He imagined these to be the dates of the portraits' creation, then realized it was something else. They were dates of birth and death. And yet these were measured not in years or decades but . . .

Enfield glanced up and moved softly along the corridor, Formicaleon following. Ahead of them was a door.

Something was prompting Formicaleon not to open it. Was it because of his synchronicity with Enfield? Was it his fear? The strigari in their history could add to themselves and out of this could do more.

Humans, though aware of this other-craft had tried to

eliminate it. Some had argued it was a blasphemy. Formicaleon recalled his prayers earlier and then recalled something else. On the beach were not only two bodies but a small clustering of ash. One would see bonfires now and then, island to island, small yellow eyes peering in the dark. He hadn't consciously made notice of it, not till now.

He opened the door.

There was a woman and a bed and she lying upon it. The bed was something out of Ottawa with its curtain half-drawn. He moved to her carefully and noticed the window beyond.

Glancing to this the mystery concluded itself.

The woman stared at him mutely the whole time. She said not a word. Enfield glanced at her and noticed no guilt, no shame. With withered hands she tried to push herself up, but failed, her grey head resting upon a pillow of violet.

No words were said. Nothing was said nor could there be any words equalled her actions. He noticed again the window, what lay beyond, and then took a chair from the corner, went beside the bed, and sat.

Waiting.

He neither held nor hand nor spat at her, nor comforted her nor pitied her nor mocked her. He simply sat. Enfield would be needed for comforting, pitying, etc. But he knew his presence damned her or were she given the power she would have damned him.

Enfield nestled her muzzle against the ancient hands and the woman spent her final moments in the company of something which seemed to love her utterly.

Then death came last.

He rose finally, went to the arched window, and stared out at the place beyond. Hidden from view was a cemetery and in that cemetery were hundreds of the dead. All given the same name.

All her.

The man had a name. The woman a name, all women a name and later he would make his report. He would report how this man had stumbled upon a way to bring her back, to craft the woman of his dreams again and again, or someone from home who had decided instead to stay, only to make certain she would never leave him again.

The bonfire? Yes, the bonfire was for his art. When the walls were filled with her portraits, he would take their excess and burn them. How many times he had done this it was impossible to say.

The young girl? The last iteration of her had crafted the girl as a weapon, shaped the girl into the best version of herself, and given this child to him, to do with as he wished.

And afterward, she did as she was crafted to do, to obey the unsaid command to be free. No. No, not even that. To fly. In death it was designed within her, this last daughter of this first hated father that as the blood ebbed and the sinews quickened, then slowed, she would look up and imagine for one brief moment she was flying.

Why had none of them left?

They had been crafted in such a way as to find the waters of Temaukel poisonous. Their skin was like acid rain suspended crystalline and all it needed to burn was a single drop of the native water. As such the man had to provide the waters of home to sustain his infinite brides.

And now no one was left to even mourn or mock the cruelty of man.

The pieces of art were taken into Wintek, and transformed into a ghost museum for all the souls of Temaukel to enjoy. The strigari only entered in when the walls dissolved away and the whole canopy of stone seemed an endless surf of white rain spraying backward into the sky.

Formicaleon himself helped bury the last woman in her

tomb.

As Xiiona was giving birth to a daughter who would become herself, as Xiiona was giving birth to a serpent who would grow in a moment to a child conceived without father or lover Formicaleon took a handful of dust from the ground, scattered it upon the coffin's skin, said his few words of memory and loss and the body was lain in the stone, where the bodies of her people lay.

HERE BE DRAGONS

There was a dragon with a human face staring at her. And the face was of the man she used to know. She killed it without hardly saying a word, then went on her way.

The hatuibwari behemoth thundered behind her, its body surrendering to the grass which with hungry fingers reached up and began devouring it.

Above her Cymralis could be seen, this suspended eye of crimson in a sea obsidian. She could almost imagine it watching her. Absurd of course.

Ahead loomed the orchid, a singular deadly blossom in a sea of serpents, as tall as she with a white bloom and long curling stem bleeding into the ground.

She approached, knowing what was to happen to her.

Desiring it finally.

Cymryeth had the Mnokaryn, the technique by which they resurrected. This was symbolized by a beetle though the action was known as this.

Stepping before it, long tendrils bit into her flesh.

She allowed herself to fall into its embrace even while knowing here there be dragons . . .

In its narcotic awe, she was carried back years to the times her lover lived.

He had been the one man she had devoted her own life to.

Suddenly a year burned into her, scarred along her back the entire life of their life together, and then his death. And after that, the lone lonely waiting for this moment now.

In the past she walked between two cities where they had lived, passing the same road again and again wearing the very stones down by their steps. And now finally she could stop.

He was there about to be murdered and she stopped this in the dream logic of a separate time there upon the road with

moons overhead and waters bleeding black in the distance, as the murderer she stopped and killed.

And then she alone killed him she loved.

She killed him again and again, imagining each of a thousand ways he died.

Even when the dragons began to feed upon her, she still could not stop, even when a jaculus dart-serpent was about to aim still she could not stop.

And why?

In this eternity she owned him utterly, fully, completely. He was her creature, to beg, to plead, to die, to plead again.

It was always thus with the orchid, not the chance to say goodbye but to greedily become the means of the end itself.

And it was never clear if the drakaina orchid twisted the mind of its victims or if only those already twisted sought the thing out. All that mattered was whether it was better to leave the beast alone or send a few mad fools to it then have it cross creation and melt lives in its shadow.

Here upon the moon of Charynix high above the long leering blood-touched eye of Cymralis stood the drakaina orchid, waiting, never moving, never needing to move.

For here there be dragons.

And dragons are its natural prey.

A UNIQUE METHOD OF MURDER

Not all killing is of the body you know. Sometimes the mind is the only victim and the beating of the heart, and pulse of each breath is simply another sign of the corpse's decay.

I was on Sarjanis when I learned of this.

I had been stationed there in the city of Kythairia beside the river of Haligral. Why mention this? I have a list of places: Xicorgath, Xicgorah, Xilythcgorah. I whisper those names and others as a litany that I'm still sane, still here, still me because when I start to forget panic sets in, sometimes at night, sometimes half-asleep when I'm bolted awake because those words have slipped my memory.

I recall Kythairia and each street becomes hidden behind my eyes in the stairway of my skull, and the colour of the river becomes something I feel like the logic of a dream as if one can feel colour or see a song.

So, I recall and will dare not forget. Allow me to explain why.

I had been summoned to find the murderer of R'shyel Erlanyn. She was a young woman, by human standards, and I was led to her body on the bed, her body which was still breathing.

But she was not there anymore.

I could describe the room. I was led up a flight of stairs the shade of white you see in the ruins of London, doors opened and the bedroom was this lavish sea of silks and fine art, all of it reeking of a black perfume.

And she was there, the bed this elaborate massive thing, an island in a sea of alabaster and the servant said she was dead and after explaining the truth I believed her.

There is a substance found on Sarjanis distilled from a

metallic-coloured grass. It is called ghazakaryn, and ghazakaryn is a very special poison. It does not kill the body. It kills the mind.

The young woman could breathe, even stand, but no aspect of her from the poisoning to the day of her birth was left now.

It would be as if she were gone, never to return, as if dead yet somehow alive. And I was asked to solve her murder.

In most mystery stories it is a drawn-out affair. One searches for clues, seeks all the minutia of the case and makes special notes upon cause, effect, who would gain, who would lose, but nothing like that happened here.

One of the servants named Tairustra had done it. It barely required an hour of my time. The servant had distilled it in her room and had been the last to deliver food to her mistress.

She had complained bitterly and repeatedly how unpleasant she found the young woman and when asked confessed. She sat in her room, glanced up at me once, *smiling*, and confessed.

I've seen corpses grinning as their flesh peeled away who seemed less cruel than her smile.

She was led away and there was neither reward nor even a sense of justice in the act.

Even if she were executed, she would still die as herself and since the poison was not used to execute prisoners it was unlikely she would ever face the reflection of what she had done to another.

So why am I recording this? Is not the point to lay bare some marvellous case, and make myself into the hero? Who would be fool enough to pen a story and reveal it all by the second page?

The mystery was not who killed her.

The mystery was what happened next.

I spent weeks with that young woman. Her people, the people of Sarjanis are divided between the tranlynir and the iylisargalis. I never described them properly, did I?

Tranlynir are these violet-skinned women each of whom is born pregnant, giving birth by their fifth year. Their abdomens peel back and out of this a small clutch of infants are delivered.

The iylisargalis, of which the murderer was one, are green, and every four generations, and only every four generations, their sons are born, as well as daughters.

During my time investigating I was in her company even as she was about to give birth. As her murderer was sentenced to Salcaina to work in the fire lands R'shyel delivered six daughters.

And I spent time with them as well.

I spent days and days in the company of a dead woman watching her slowly regain the use of her arms, and her legs, slowly recalling words and language as her servants clustered around. It isn't discussed in stories the fate of those who are left behind when the murderer is captured, the mystery concluded.

Well, I stayed with them for a time. Then I was summoned away. I went to Carthral Malachire in another land, still upon Sarjanis.

Three years passed.

I heard by correspondence the servant died. Salcaina is an unforgiving world and someone put her name in some lottery . . . I never fully understood the rest.

After three years I returned, and imagine my surprise to meet her. Not the victim but one of her daughters.

Her name was Taweret. And she remembered me.

And for a few years, we were together.

I lived with a woman the exact image of a corpse, who would never love me, (as I said only their servants had that singular skill and only once every four generations,) and yet in my small way, I was happy.

And she remembered and knew me. She knew each day I'd spent with them and rattled off all the small details of the outsider in me. And I couldn't say if I remembered it all.

When the country of a day is as vast as a continent, when the woman you know knows everything about you until sometimes it feels you're losing bits of yourself, leaving pieces of yourself behind, how long till you fear . . . a certain poison.

The other daughters also knew me but Taweret had spent the most time, though I couldn't remember it. Three years had been like three centuries. After that I began to practice, to remember everything because I realize, realized, even as she began to die, as seven years passed and her daughters grew that when she departed that final time, I wouldn't be able to remember everything about her.

In her death, a part of me would also die.

So, the mystery is this, that after death, when all is done, when all is said, when memories are lost, we only really recall the reason they were taken and not the persons they might have been. I will remember their deaths more vividly than them as I am taken and taken apart until nothing of me is left.

It is just the subtle poison of growing old.

IRKALLA

Prologue

I would be her if I could.

I would be you, or her, or stop someone along the streets,
and beneath their skin become.

I can see it all so clearly all the time, the chance to be. And
without her, or you, or those accidents, all those accidents, I am
nothing. I am hollowed out.

I am alone.

I would be her if I could, if for only an hour.

And I hear her whispering *I forgive you*.

I.

There was a small room and upon the dais in its centre lay
the body of a woman, corpse-grey shell of a skin. It was like a
chrysalis had been suspended and crumpled here, bones melting
away like a jellyfish, eyes pooling into darkness, and nothing
more.

The room itself was the glassy black stone of an obsidian
world and Falias and Ypotryll stood over her in deep repose.
There was nothing else here save the upraised platform for the
body, the two detectives, and the corpse herself. It was as if the
world were empty, beyond the few living and the solitary dead.

Then entered the pathologist shattering the illusion.

The pathologist herself wore the traditional robes and
garments of her people. Her face was covered by a bright ornate
golden mask of a bird, blunt short beak a spear of sapphire, and
the eyes azure as well, twin inland seas of a continent incongruous
with this world.

Her body was shielded behind layers of white cloth so as
she moved it seemed a pillar was walking, or a wraith.

All were like this here, hidden from view. Only at death

was the true form revealed, naked aspects of the person coming to the fore finally.

"She must be taken," the pathologist said quietly. In the room, there was no sound above a whisper. It was as if the whole world demanded silence and the living made compromises by not revealing their true strength.

The knife, the cause of death, lay a little to the side held in the embrace of a stone depression. The detectives had already seen this and so had no further need of it. It would remain here in the company of stones and the tenders of the dead, its purpose concluded.

The corpse who had once been Sithcind remained as the detectives departed.

II.

Falias and Ypotryll waited a time outside.

There was an obsidian storm blasting at the walls of the buildings, fine granules of glass eating into the basalt planet. They did not wear masks but did have the garments of the daughters of Hetemit. In all the city theirs were the only faces left unconcealed and exposed.

And in time only Falias would be left.

The dead were even now being prepared. Fachanan could be seen coming up the street crashing invisibly into the ghosts around her, herself the only witness to their being. Falias, the older of the two, waited till she came fully, glass-dust nearly suffocating, (by now she had placed the goggles over her eyes, turning her into a mirage of some large indescribably vast insect,) and would have saluted Fachanan but the woman barely saw her.

Ypotryll, the younger, strands of blond hair peeling from her hood turned and watched the masked figure enter the morgue.

In another hour they would know who had killed Sithcind and why.

The two turned and went to a nearby tavern to have a drink.

Hetemit was a darker world. Cymralis was desert and Temaukel ocean. Even Falmer, lethal little Falmer was a world lit by a familiar seeming sun. But Hetemit was a darker world. One would have mistaken it for Salcaina perhaps.

There were similarities.

Both were countries of stone, both lands of labyrinths, cities of mazes, but where fire was the predominant element of one the other was only . . . cold. Always cold, whole continents sheets of obsidian where no plants grew. On Salcaina the solution was the harvesting of bodies to mirror copies of the living which gave birth to small feasts, and there was always also on the blade of meditation thought of storms, the lottery, cruel logic of survival.

But here the solution was the dead.

The dead only.

Life existed here as shadow. Even now Hetemit was continuing its slow decline, the planet cooling, the oceans receding away. These were the final days, the last season slowly thrown into oblivion and decay. Already most had left. Once four billion lived here, now only one city comprising barely five thousand. Soon Hetemit would be sealed away as memory, left to rot.

Yet someone had been ended early as if impatient for the end. And how had they survived before the arrival of mankind?

"How long?" Falias asked, as much to herself as Ypotryll.

"Don't know."

The tavern was across the road. All buildings on Hetemit were composed of the same rough black stone and the chambers within were riddled with shadow. The daughters of Hetemit who still resided here all wore their white garments, only fragments of

any other colour beyond their skin and eyes.

The masks of birds or beasts were themselves symbols of their decline and their survival. No birds sang on Hetemit yet they remembered it. No insects crawled along its shores yet here was a woman wearing the face of a fly, jewel-black eyes transformed to sapphire or moonstone in the shifting half-light.

Were one willing they could step back to a time when the oceans were full, when soil blossomed and had not yet been carried away. All one had to do was ingest the *Urit Hekau Netrit* and it could all be theirs again.

Imagine a sheer pool of black water with the consistency of oil nestled in small crevices. Imagine it hungrily waiting for someone thirsting not for water but for water's purpose, the scaffolding to be.

Scaffolding to be.

When humans came this exact phrase had been used to describe the *Urit Hekau Netrit* and it was an apt phrase. When ingested it allowed one to perceive the life of another, and to experience that life fully.

It would not last long. The dead could only linger a singular season but in taking the dark waters of memory one would not only consume one life but all the thoughts of that life and so all the thoughts that came before as well.

If a child saw once her mother, heard once her mother's words, listened to some scrap of history then the one seeing through dead eyes would need only know this much to know all.

For in the language of remembrance everything seen would become the totality of that person so that if she saw her mother her mother would be added to the sheer knowledge the possessor would receive.

But if this parent herself saw things as a child this too would be added, a thread going back further and further, telescoping outward forever as far distant as the time of birds or

insects or to the days of primordial things.

And if one consumed many current lives then their sight would equal the eyes of a god . . . so some believed.

As such all Falias and Ypotryll had to do was wait for the murderer to be revealed.

As they got to talking Falias noticed Ypotryll's left hand. Her finger was gone. Her third finger was missing now to go off into oblivion with her first. For some reason, the second finger remained, defiant perhaps.

"Is there any pain?" Falias asked.

There was no pain.

Ypotryll had been stricken with a chameleon disease while on Falmer. It was a rare illness, something cruel in its simplicity. The ailment caused the person to slowly dissolve away a piece at a time. Nothing was actually lost. Her fingers were still there.

However perceptually they were gone.

She couldn't even feel them herself. Where the finger joint bled into the knuckle was a flat opening revealing blood and bone. Falias could reach out and touch this knowing she was touching Ypotryll's finger yet remain incapable of perceiving it.

But this was not the final cruelty of the disease.

For when each part of her was rendered imperceptible those who knew her would forget she ever was. One would only know Ypotryll had lived because of the documents she wrote, pictures taken of her with others, and others' written documents about her. But for all intents and purposes at death she would cease to be.

One could argue there is no reason for such a thing as this.

Why would a disease commit such an act? But why would a disease cause any suffering? Is it more excusable that an illness causes one to die by bleeding through one's skin or by fire racing through one's veins or is it more logical to watch someone lying upon a bed in agony and then hear them writhe no more and

argue that the plague should have been more polite, as if a plague had the same reasoning as a man?

Ypotryll was going to die and none would remember her. Even as Falias would try.

The tavern had liquor, the colour of bile. It was yellow-wood brandy, imported from Falmer. It had an interesting ability to inverse one's personality most completely. Under its influence one became their opposite.

Even as a few drank more simply watched. Half the pleasure was not in getting drunk but watching others become their antithesis.

"Look," Ypotryll said quietly. It had begun.

One of the daughters of Hetemit had taken enough from a small cup the size of her fist and was already screaming. She wasn't saying anything. Just screaming. Most were quiet for the land was like a sepulchre so listening to one moaning or crying was good medicine to the detectives.

But this they never drank themselves.

If this liquor could change behavior so completely could it make a harmless soul a murderer? Sometimes, but so could any liquor, or anything at all. It all depended on the circumstances.

"After this case, do you want to return home?" Falias asked.

"I thought about it but I'd rather go back to Falmer."

"Why there?" Falias glanced up quickly to see Ypotryll's expression. Usually, any mention of that world would have been torture but over the last few days, a change had come over her. She no longer hated the sound of it, seemed almost eager once or twice to return as if in going to where she began to die, she could face her death with almost dignity.

"I want to go where it is green," she replied.

"Well by now I'm sure the ritual is complete. We should get going." Falias rose, robes rustling in the absence of wind.

Ypotryll rose too, staring into the dark eyes of her partner. If she did return would Falias go with her? Of course. But after her death would Falias even remember why she went there?

"We should get going," Falias replied. "It's time."

III.

They returned to the cool rooms where the pathologist had placed the corpse upon another dais. It was the same room in appearance but the location was wrong and the knife was gone. It would never be moved again. When all the world was closed up and sealed away the knife would still be left here, violence frozen to a point.

Fachanan was in the middle before the corpse, bowl to her side, empty. She wore the mask of Sithcind now, of a small scorpion, its tail drooping before her mouth, pincers opened around her eyes with a brood of smaller scorpions about her, her children doing their all to hide the face of the woman beneath.

"Who am I addressing?" Falias asked.

And the dead answered her.

"I am Sithcind," it said.

"You were killed earlier today. You were stabbed in a field beyond the city. Why were you killed? Who killed you? And why were you beyond the limits of the city?"

"To die," the corpse said briefly. "I went out to die."

Fachanan moved.

Sithcind had been a carver of stone in life and there was in the room a small block of obsidian. As she continued to speak, instinctively she moved to the block, grasping a chisel and hammer.

"I don't understand," Ypotryll said.

"I went out into the fields with my blade. I went out into the fields to end myself. I clutched the blade to my own throat and slit it. Then stabbed myself, once, and lay upon the cold stones.

Breathing."

She continued sculpting for this was the last block she had had in life. And even now she wished to finish it.

"Why would you end yourself?" Falias asked.

"To be Fachanan," the dead woman said.

And both detectives stopped. They glanced at the hidden face, robes twining as the body worked. Fachanan was under those robes, they knew it, but at that moment there was a terrible fear that Sithcind was working and Fachanan on the dais resting there.

As if guessing their thoughts the hand lifted the mask and revealed Fachanan's face.

Then the dead continued working.

By this time the pathologist left. Before she had been in the other room working but at the mention of what happened she departed silently. She said nothing, took nothing save a memento, a small statuette of herself, and went onto the street.

She never looked right nor left but made her way home.

She'd seen this happen before and never wishing to see it again she stayed the rest of the day in her rooms as if dreaming.

"Why would you wish to be Fachanan?" Falias asked.

"I wish to feel again," the dead said. "I wish to be again."

By now the statue had taken shape, becoming the rough outline of a woman's form, the stone unusually soft or brittle or Sithcind had had so many years of practice it was all routine by now.

"There was no murder then," Ypotryll said softly. "And when this is over the case is solved."

"I am not leaving this body," the dead woman said. "I will be here forever."

Falias spoke up then, loudly.

"That is not how this works. When the water fades you will fade away, leaving Fachanan intact."

And before either could react the artist put the chisel to her own throat.

"I will not go back into the dark. Alone. I will take her with me. Even now I feel all she felt, all they felt before me. I am Haltijia in the caverns of Utir. I am Gancanagh who carved this very mask worn for a hundred generations." Already was the slow sound of madness rising in her speech. "I exist as legion and in the continent of her body, I can become them all. And she sees all this and knows and the more she knows the more I will become. I will ascend and if I take her with me until someone else drinks the dark waters of memory, and I will occupy her body then, forever and forever and . . . and . . ." And the dead woman stopped.

And Ypotryll crept closer to her.

"It's all going away, isn't it?" she asked. And the mask quivered and fell revealing a woman crying as if surrounded by the dark. "All the world is being thrown away and nothing is left. When did you decide to die? How many days after the announcement that Hetemit was lost, that nothing could save it? How many days?"

She couldn't remember. Fewer than ten.

"How long have you known Fachanan?"

All her life, the dead woman said.

"And I imagine right now you can see everything, can't you? How many are in there with you? How many lives? What did birds look like before? What did the ocean look like? I never knew, all I had were stories. But you know. Right now, you can see it all. Why don't you show me what's going away."

And the dead woman went to a nearby wall and started carving. She carved into the stone the cities of crystal beside oceans of sapphire and drew the shapes of birds with six wings and the scorpions she showed had three tails.

Birds and scorpions were just the closest terms to what

they were.

Falias watched the two talk as Sithcind slowly faded away and when Fachanan returned she started weeping, feeling her friend going to an oblivion which swirled about them all.

And in that final moment, Falias knew she would not remember Ypotryll in another season. All she would remember was the saving of this life this day, and the portrait of Hetemit forever gone.

COCAIGNE

I. A Murder in Cocaigne

Tonight, in Toronto, someone died.

Passing from small bazaars, beyond labyrinthine passages peopled by women wearing masks of birds and scorpions, beyond a conclave of lawyers drawing names for oblivion, lay one dying.

A moment before the end Nirangira's thoughts turned in two equal directions as time slowed.

In one way the thought of her death, sheer oblivion, or the country of the dead she was going to. But this was academic before the true end happened when all doubts would be removed.

However, and this was such a bizarre thing, she also thought about her last play.

Now when one is dying, when all is ended, hope cast away it seems incredulous that one's last thoughts would turn toward anything other than survival, grasping one second like a drowning man reaching for the shore.

But divided along the surface of her thoughts was split evenly the realization of dying and the drama, some conflictless drama she lavished half a lifetime upon.

The plot was the struggle between the good and the better where there was no terrible choice, never would one face true tragedy being the best of all possible worlds, and so, at last, she lived inside her story, watching Iridius choose between a good life before him and a better life to come.

Staring upward at the endless moon and stars as if she were upon the dark side of the sun she listened to the applause of her creation's finishing as its final act ebbed and was stilled.

And she was done.

II. Penderglass Investigates

Nirangira was laid upon a slab in the morgue, cool steel reflected grimly in his eyes as he stared at her.

She was young, from where he could not say. Her features seemed like a daughter of Hetemit but the eyes . . . something golden about them without being gold. If he turned at just the right angle, barely seeing her the eyes reflected some shimmering aspect within, but in gazing down full upon her they were just hazel.

The thin stiletto knife had been recovered still sticking from her body, her body discovered hours before by a cymryeth merchant who for no reason had decided to walk toward the alley.

Perhaps he had seen some cockroaches sliding toward the dead or the sound of cats making love in the night or maybe there had been just the rough scent of an alien blood in the air which to him was as subconsciously unnatural as quicksilver in human veins.

It hardly mattered. He was not a suspect having spent hours in the open naked air, seen by countless people. He had discovered her body but was not the cause of it.

"Do we have an address?" he asked the pathologist.

A scarlet-bodied woman approached.

"Got it a while ago."

"We know who this is?"

"You don't?" she asked, surprised.

"No. I was just told to come down to investigate."

"Who told you?"

"Sithcarn."

"Ah. Yes, well this is Athrajel Nirangira."

"Not a native then," he said.

The pathologist stared at him, uncertain what to say.

"No," she said finally.

She had not met Penderglass before. Seemed an oddly bland fellow, moustache carefully waxed, clothes funeral brown, eyes half-glazed.

For a moment she was certain he was intoxicated. The morgue being the station's lowest level where walls were identical pallor to the bodies here tended to elicit a certain terror.

So, perhaps the young man had merely taken a few glances of yellow-wood brandy to become someone else awhile.

But she doubted it.

"Anything found on the body?"

"No."

"Then I'll go to her apartment, and find out more about her."

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Penderglass said.

"You know who this is, right?"

"A woman."

Damn it, she thought to herself. *What is wrong with this man?*

"This was one of the most famous playwrights in the Dominion. Her work is revered on Salcaina, Cymralis, even Falmer."

"That's good," he said, "I'm sure solving her case will be important."

Important to whom? she asked herself as he departed. Did he mean it would be important to his career or important to her admirers? Or did he mean something else?

Still wondering she continued her work upon the corpse, peeling back the skin to reveal all that lay beneath.

Penderglass had gone to her apartment, crossing endless streets of the eternal city, encountering the living as if for the first

time. It was on the second floor of a brick edifice lined with dragon statues and as one walked the black curving serpentine bodies seemed to slowly move, glimpse by glimpse, rounding the square building but never leaving it.

Climbing the curling stairs, he seemed lost in thought as if trying to remember which foot went where, like he was ascending above the skin of the earth for the first time.

Her apartment was already under scrutiny but he showed his badge and the young man let him in, standing aside from the door. Poor boy almost saluted.

Penderglass was greeted by a room littered with books along walls and little else. There was a desk somewhere. Maybe a chair.

The apartment was divided between the book-stained room and some place in the back where a bed might be hiding. Scouring the volumes he plucked them out and began reading.

As if for the first time.

The first book involved a colony of religious types who had crossed the Infinite Sea only to arrive at a new world with no way home, stranded only by their beliefs and ancient laws, all of which failed them, even with their sacrifice of the divine.

It was not subtle but Penderglass took notes on its author. Sitvhar Wintereign.

After this was a book involving a colony of jellyfish swimming in the blue waters of a far ocean unable to notice ahead of them a sheer cliff in the sea, they having no way to turn away. The soft descriptions of their bodies, limbs dragging along behind them like translucent wire in an electric-blue sea, and their bodies but glass transparencies, blind, oblivious, and alive.

Another book then, and another.

Finally, fingers brushed against a thing he was looking for without quite knowing why. It was a small book white in colour nestled between two volumes of red and black and pulling it out

began to read. It spoke of small imperfect little pieces of the air and how as they changed from snow to water, if one could exist within them, if there was a life so small within the object of them that the change from snow to water would be the oblivion of their world and they would cease to exist as they were and become quite another thing.

He sat reading, never even remembering if there was a chair he was sitting in, imagining the billions of tiny worldlets suffering a final oblivion and all upon them perishing or changing into something else.

He heard the mute shuffling of feet outside and glanced up and saw the young officer peering in.

"Is there anything of note?" the young man asked as if he'd never been in the room before, as if only the eyes of a detective could reveal any truth to him.

"No," Penderglass said simply and rose, the officer looking strangely as he did so.

Moments later he was gone.

The young officer struggled to remember him, the colour of his hair, and eyes, but couldn't. Hadn't even noticed his name.

Glancing back inside his eyes fell upon the book of ice and he was reminded of the precinct without knowing why. He thought of the summer warmth of the rooms, typewriters tattooing familiar patterns into the air and the winter-glazed door of Sithcarn's office, a fragment of winter in a sea of summertime.

Penderglass by now utterly forgotten.

Penderglass went to the alley where she had died.

He stood imagining snow drifting away, small worldlets becoming miniature oceans and seas, imagined this the way a child might imagine a deity without hesitation or doubt, something as real as gravity even if currently unfelt.

As he bent down he heard a noise behind him.

Glancing up noticed the detective's approach.

Tulkane turned the corner and stared at him a moment before coming toward him. Dark features betrayed a warm smile as Tulkane came into the company of the unknown.

"Now how did you get here?" he asked.

"I walked," Penderglass said.

"What, did Sithcarn send you?"

"Yes. Sithcarn sent me."

For some reason, Tulkane doubted that.

"We've already scoured the area, there's no sign of clues."

"I know. I just wanted to be here."

There was something so damned calm about the way he spoke which unnerved Tulkane. He passed a dark hand over hair whitened by years and wondered why Sithcarn sent another here.

By now the investigation was underway. Unlike in stories where there is a great deal of complexity, moves, and countermoves, in real life murderers are usually common things with common motives and common weaknesses.

Already Tulkane had his suspicions as to who had killed her and why.

"Did you know her?" Penderglass asked suddenly.

"No."

"You saw her plays?"

"One. Some drama about the better and the good."

"Where was she from?"

"Don't know. Heard once she was from Hetemit but for some reason never believed it. Why?"

"Don't know," Penderglass said hazily, as if half in dream.

"Look, most likely it was her rival, one," he glanced at the small black notebook in his hand, "John Myrkalfar. We're bringing him in for questioning. Hey, I was assigned this case, why did Sithcarn send you too? I wasn't told about another detective."

"Sithcarn sent me," Penderglass said hazily again as if stuck in a loop leading to the conversation's beginning.

Tulkane turned as if hearing something then turned back.

For a moment he half-expected Penderglass to be gone but he was still there, now walking toward him.

Without a word, he exited onto the street, turned left, and was gone as if hidden by the shadow of the building opposite.

Tulkane brushed his hand over his head, an old tic of his, usually signifying something he couldn't quite explain.

It seemed he'd seen a ghost.

III. The Golden Mirror

In the *Golden Mirror*, there was a report about three fishermen who, having arrived in the city lost their clothes and took some from a clothesline. Being considered thieves the three could have been hanged but instead were sent off to Falmer for a year.

It was reported in the *Golden Mirror* newspaper that the three fishermen were appealing.

In two years, they might even be heard.

Glancing at the paper Sithcarn spit on the street, mostly due to his annoyance with the case. A few men who lost their clothes by accident being sentenced for something so petty unnerved him. On Cymralis or Hetemit such punishments wouldn't occur but it was essential to show the law disfavoured all equally.

He was in front of his precinct, angrily watching crowds pass by. Waiting.

Despite what most imagine murders and murderers are childishly simple things. Most act on passion or desire having no plan, no idea from second to second. During the night his detectives looked into all her contacts, friends, and enemies and

had inquired personally why she was in that alley when she was.

Despite what one might imagine the killer turned up too easily.

John Myrkalfar was Nirangira's chief rival and the second-best playwright. He had twice now threatened to murder her, was physically strong enough to do it, and had no alibi at the time of the murder, claiming he was asleep.

In most stories, and this was a point Sithcarn knew intimately, this would make it seem unlikely he was guilty. Surely a clever killer would have created a better alibi or had some finer instinct on the act of murder.

But by now Tulkane and Astryageth had gone to get him and in another thirty minutes after he arrived, after he pleaded claiming to know nothing and after Tulkane politely told him all the evidence they had against him, namely the club he had used to kill Nirangira, and after he had smugly told them no club had been involved, he would confess.

He would explain how he had mentioned noticing her walking down an alley for inspiration and taking the opportunity stabbed her in the back. And unlike those three fishermen, he would in another year hang for it. The case of her death would be a childishly simple thing.

The real issue would be the questions of her life.

Nirangira was buried on the sixteenth day of the month in a small burial plot the daughters of Hetemit used. The reason for this was that it was still unclear where she was from.

After the arrest, Tulkane had been given the task of notifying next of kin, which proved an impossible thing.

She had no next of kin.

In retracing the former steps of her life Nirangira was not so much born as simply began.

There is a record of her emerging as a leading playwright

in what he assumed to have been her twentieth year.

There is her list of plays and the acquisitions of her library but no date of birth nor when she arrived via the Infinite Sea.

She was not before, then came to be, then was not now.

Half of the killer's motive sprang from the jealousy of her simply *being* one day.

On a Thursday John's plays were the rage and he was the centerpiece of culture. On Friday out of the ether emerged Nirangira and he was eclipsed.

Yet though all had seen her plays, (Tulkane included,) few could remember how she got her start as a playwright.

She appeared and began directing, notes of her work as if appearing from nowhere.

And though Tulkane had seen her plays he couldn't remember where he'd seen them.

The theatre on Main Street? Or was it Second Street?

Lost in thought one day about this, (the entire ordeal of notification, investigation, and so on taking about a week,) he sat at the kitchen table and looked over his notes.

Nirangira was not a daughter of Hetemit nor a child of Cymralis nor human nor from Falmer nor Salcaina nor even some empty machine that had masqueraded as a human being.

She had died but he had no clue how she had lived.

After her killer's arrest, everything seemed concluded as if in finding the killer all logic of the universe bled to that one point.

Instead, the point of violence rippled outward since knowing who killed her was not nearly as important as knowing who she was.

Or was it . . . ?

He stopped himself.

His wife Inari came and sat across from him.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I have this case . . . you've heard of Nirangira of course?"

"We saw her production of *Dnair Sitcharn*, so yeah."

"Well, I can't find any information about her after her arrival here. It's like before she didn't exist."

Inari coiled a curl of blond hair about her finger, deep in thought.

"Not human?" she asked.

"Not sure." As he glanced at his notes he noticed a name. Penderglass. "I wonder what this means?" He reached up and peered carefully at a thin strip of paper. There in the alley without even remembering he had written down the name.

"Who's Penderglass?" Inari asked.

"I don't know. For a moment it sounded familiar, like something I should know." Tulkane turned the paper over in his hands, the cream-white colour an odd contrast to . . . the alley. He had been in the alley when he wrote this.

Yes. He had been in the alley.

He rose as if awakened from a dream struggling to remember something important but in the point between waking and sleeping and waking logic failed him and he forgot it utterly.

As if somehow hollowed out he sat again, staring at the name before trying to forget it.

What he almost thought about was this.

Knowing who she was, *or knowing who they were*.

But the thought left him and so he put his notes away and the two dined together, discussing their lives, or summer in December.

Penderglass walked a time, investigating.

It had been supremely important to walk her route, see her life and the endings of it.

As the day lengthened into his mind, he knew himself finally.

In time he reached her sacred plot of ground, sat upon

winter-crushed grass, and looked up once or twice to her tombstone. The daughters of Hetemit had no such thing but since it was unclear her origin it was best to be of two minds about everything. A Hetemit burial and a terrestrial grave marker.

It was becoming clearer to him now.

He was gaining more himself.

In his hand was a book. He had spent a day reading in old libraries. Her books mostly. But not just hers.

Wintereign had become an interest of his.

"Are you a member of the family of the deceased?" someone asked. Behind him slowly came a priest. Although the burial site was Hetemit it bordered another faith's plot to the south.

"Yes," Penderglass said simply. "I am."

"How are you related to the dead?"

"I am her son," Penderglass said simply. "Born by her."

"You seem older than she," the grey priest replied, his withered skin like autumn twigs rustling in winter's garments.

"Appearances are not important. Only truth."

"If you are a member of her family, where did she come?"

"The autumn wind," Penderglass said, standing up. "And the ocean tide, and the death knell of a world."

"Are you trying to be pretentious?" the old priest asked.

"No. No, I am in earnest old man. My mother was born on Hetemit, carried in the mind of a daughter of air on Temaukel, and wandered in a jungle on Falmer, before coming here. My mother had no shape before but once here she hardened like glass into her role. It became suited for her and her alone. And so, she became herself.

"And I am her son. But I am not her only one."

Then Penderglass began to walk away.

"Wait. I didn't get your name."

"My name is Iridius," he said.

As the priest watched him depart, he remembered the shape of his eyes, colour of his voice, and a day later when Tulkane would ask for a description of the visitor the old priest would give it easily with all the casual ease of describing any normal thing that went wandering over the ground and in the sea and through the skies of the world.

He just seemed ordinary.

SAILING TO KHARTOUM

Prologue

You'll be leaving then? I can feel it, the way you look at the stars. You want to be there, I guess. Maybe some part of me too. But I digress since I can't let you go.

And now you know.

I.

Jasper Topaz Beryl scratched at the scales about his eyes.

If looked in sideways they would observe a relatively large, somewhat ordinary-looking man, save for the singular feature of the eyes and what was around them, sapphire blue scales, as if from a fish, located in a semicircle from the edge of the nose to the outer edge of the eyebrows.

He was a native of the planet Ketu Sathyrix and Erytigora, his mother from the white shores of Erytigora, and his father a lizard from a shadow planet beyond.

Or at least this was the story.

In truth, he appeared last month at the 87th Precinct, and recalled always having been there retroactively. It wasn't as simple as everyone receiving memories of him being there. He had appeared and they all knew this. Rather when subconsciously acting, as if pretending the truth were not evident suddenly there blossomed in their lives his presence. But by consciously thinking truth came round again. He was another emergent soul.

Toronto was becoming full of them.

But this was the first time other planets had entered into the equation. For the worlds of which he came from had never existed and yet each one approached this realization as if they did, as if one could cross the Infinite Sea and they'd be there, waiting.

Perhaps in another generation, this might even be true.

So, it was Jasper who continued his role as detective

having always been what he was now and he was assigned a case as if he'd always been assigned cases, as if he'd never been a boy or infant but simply a man whose purpose was this.

So he was, and so it was, and so he did.

"Name of the deceased?" he asked.

The deceased was a young man named Astreign and he had been found lying in his room, form frozen, arms at odd angles, face jeering upward. The room was a nondescript affair bereft of any comforts of home outside a single cot, a window showing a wall opposite, a door leading out, and a closet filled with two changes of clothing. Beyond this, the man's life did not present itself as anything above a fossil.

Now his body went to join the nature of his possessions.

He had been found when the rent failed to materialize. The landlord knocked, no answer, entrance gained, form discovered, police informed, and the rest Jasper knew as the officer at the scene explained.

The initial investigation consisted of making certain the deceased had not died of natural causes. Jasper ascertained this by a glance at the poor young man's lips. Aschiel poisoning, noticing the colour of moacia upon them, not a terrestrial colour nor any hue of the human spectrum of perception.

Yet he saw it though and so knew the cause of death.

Jasper went downstairs to where the landlord stood who should have been some loud bulk, angry at losing a tenant's money more than the loss of life. Instead, he was a quiet introspective soul whose first question was if the poor man had kin and how could he deliver a message of condolence to them.

"I don't know if the man had family. Have you seen anyone he was close to of late?" Jasper asked. He had.

"And who was this?"

A woman, not human but from where, he could not say. Since the Dominion had expanded outward, past Cymralis, past

Falmer, past the now decaying orbit of long-emptied Hetemit it was impossible to tell how many worlds were left to conquer.

But she was not human. Of that, he was intimately sure.

“And how do you know?”

She couldn’t stand the sound of a human voice, he said.

And with that, the great detective left the grieving man alone.

II.

It was a new world, taken from the old.

One could find in crossing a street a multitude of realms. Merchants of Cymralis, daughters of Hetemit, the children of Salcaina, and if one looked closely might see on certain windowsills black orchids from grim Falmer.

And now even more were being added.

Jasper crossed from one isle of brick to another. Etched in certain buildings were dragons, in others occasional crooked cross of a Jain. He stopped and noticed it bent at right angles, a symbol of peace ancient and never to be used in any cruel way.

Only a madman or a coward would have ever turned such a symbol into one it was not intended for.

Uncertain why he thought this he went on his way, the small crooked cross above the doorframe of a place of worship.

The murder of the man fixed itself upon his mind by now.

Some poor nondescript figure in a wasted room. Usually, in stories at least, there would be more to the case and the crime.

Usually, the murdered figure would hang upon some puzzle needing to be solved while he or she was nothing but fixtures, things occupying existence only by their absence.

Had the murdered a love of music? Had they regrets? Had they felt failure in their last lost moments, or triumph, or nothing? A man was not gone, Jasper theorized. It was a world made absent from the whole.

Despite the usual protests of the art of detection needing to be leagues above the common thoughts of men or women most cases were either easily solved in a day or never solved at all.

The precinct was ahead but he did not wish to go there yet nor surround himself in the brick ocean of his office and decided to walk past it as if it wasn't really there. The clicking of his boots continued as he kept at his train of thought.

No, most cases were either elementarily simple or impossible to ever be divined.

A man is found dead in a room, shot. The gun is easily deciphered being found in the dead man's hand. In the house is another man who heard the shot and came running, according to him. No other people are in the house.

Was it suicide or murder?

A clever detective would argue it conclusively a murder and claim the other man the killer since in the real world the dead do not grip guns, nor can grip anything at all. But the deceased here had a hand of silver, metallic and cold, and clasped indelibly shut about the murder weapon.

The bullet entered the skull from the left side, the same side from which the metallic hand originates. The deceased is right-handed. Again, a clever detective would argue this still proves the other man guilty since why would he use his metallic hand to commit a crime?

Unless our deceased wants it to look like murder when it is suicide or to prove suicide and that no other person is involved.

And on it goes. Even a typed suicide note could be forged. Nothing conclusively proves guilt or innocence outside the personality of either man. This alone becomes proof to most detectives. Did our deceased desire to die? Is there proof? What was he like? What was the other man like? Were they friends, lovers, enemies? Strangers?

In cases like these proving absolute guilt or innocence

becomes irrelevant. Either the other man is guilty and escapes or innocent and yet is considered a murderer all his life by those around him. Instead, what remains is the minutia of the living and the dead. Explain who the dead man was and you can begin to explain the killer. Sometimes. Just as likely, if the crime were random enough, there is no way to tell.

A rusted pipe in a dark alley in the rain is more effective at concealment than a thousand alibis or the most minutely perfect poison if the killer and their victim never knew each other before.

But this young man knew his killer Jasper reasoned.

Still if by day's end, no solution was forthcoming it might prove impossible to solve.

Now, there were instruments of discovery, creatures on far worlds who could sense the guilt or innocence of everyone or ingest special perfume-laden dark waters to commune with the dead. But these didn't help in the heart of the Dominion.

Take those dogs of Temaukel for example.

Yes, they could determine guilt or innocence but this made them a liability in the heart of the Dominion. For it was one thing to know the mind of someone far away but considering how many leaders existed here, how this was indeed the heart of a great empire was it reasonable to use the power of incorruptible law above those who claimed to wield it?

Or, put another way, did anyone in power want someone capable of knowing when their motives were less than pure?

It was claimed these truth-seers would die here anyway, whether that was true or not.

Or take the dark waters of memory, which could allow one to perceive the past. The daughters of Hetemit had used this but in the heart of Aca Nada it was deemed . . . impolite.

The real reason was it was feared this substance had somehow created beings like him and if it was used here what more creatures could be conceived?

So, with his only lead a woman who could not stand a human voice, he resolved his next move carefully before he decided to move on . . .

III.

There was a section of the city reserved for those who had simply appeared. As so they had come so too had come these settlements, not grown nor built but simply were.

Jasper crossed back into them.

One of the Dominion's dangers was its perception of itself.

Having conquered many lands, the Dominion of Aca Nada was meant, on paper, to be a force of absolute cruelty and barbarity. Jasper could wander the ruins of London, go on a short tour of the devastation, each part a cancerous charred ruin, gardens of bones blossoming scattershot everywhere. So too Paris.

Yet, and this ran the paradox of the new world, the Dominion could not perceive itself as evil. No, not even evil since evil at least had the flair of being interesting.

The Dominion had to maintain itself under the guise and mask of normalcy though the mask of sanity perhaps might have a far better ring to it.

For in being the product of many empires before itself, it was essential to distance the past from the present. The Dominion *could not* be as depraved as the past but must maintain the appearance of a world measured by its own calm.

Even while half the world burned.

Jasper crossed the threshold realms and got to work.

He made certain inquiries about the poison. Aschiel was difficult to obtain and harder to use, and combining this detail with a strange woman shortened the list of places to one.

Only here in this domain could one have acquired such a means of death and be noticed without being suspected. The

poison worked just as well on vermin as it did on women and men.

At an apothecary, a cymryeth told him where she was.

"Did she say where she lived?"

"She didn't have to," he replied. "She went to the building opposite. Said she came from there."

The building opposite was Jasper's own home.

He crossed and got to work.

IV.

Usually, one would have to knock on many doors to find the culprit. One would knock at the doors and have them be answered by the killer, waiting to confess, or some stranger, or no one at all.

In this situation, unlike all others, the cliché held.

He knocked, he inquired, and he finally found her.

She said her name was Moacia, the same as the colour. He walked into her room having first mailed a letter to the precinct indicating where the killer most likely was.

Just in case he didn't come out of this alive.

"Did you know a Mr. Astreign?" he asked.

"Yes," she said simply. In asking the question Jasper had changed the tone of his voice, lowering it several octaves to the point it was barely perceivable by a human being. But she heard it easily enough.

"What was your relationship with him?"

"He was my whole world," she said. As she spoke, he carefully glanced about the room.

It was identical to his own in terms of size and dimension. An open area in the middle, white walls lined with pictures of loved ones who might not even exist yet. A chair in the corner, a cat nestled upon it, a black pulsating island in a sea of winter shade.

The woman had not even bothered to ask him his name.

"Are you aware he is dead?"

"I am."

"Are you aware of how he died?"

"I am."

"Do I need to go on?" he asked.

"You do," she said. "I would have this out."

He walked to a window and stared outside. A woman was walking by at that moment. Her left eye was composed of silver, and her right hand was shimmering like steel. Sometimes when something was lost, a hand, an eye, a leg they were replaced with things of false flesh mimicking the real while still being felt or perceived as if they were things of flesh and blood.

It had been a means of bettering the world. Only a fool would imagine the loss of something, never replaced, would lead to good.

"Then I shall ask this simply. Are you the murderer of him?"

"I am," she said.

"And why is this?"

"Because he was a god," she reasoned, "a being of the sun and the light reduced to a moth lusting after candles."

"Would you care to explain that?" he asked.

"I am a xhal xihandra," she said, as if that explained everything.

"Go on," he said slowly.

"I was created by him. I remember for the merest moment not being, but then I was. But there was more. I intimately saw the creation from which we come, from which we came. I saw endless worlds, places of beauty. Can you imagine a single ocean dwelling forever, cities beneath it and in their midst creatures of such luminesce beauty as if there were two skies, one above the waves full of stars, and one below?

"I have seen a garden of translucent flowers the colour of desert winds and heard singing such as you cannot comprehend. He I saw also. They are like gods there, beautiful, untouched by corruption, lords, and masters, and we are their children. Then I was pulled here becoming this only to find him reduced to some squalor, living in a single room. But now he is free again to return to those pristine places I saw."

"A lord of light and sun?" he asked. Even he was not entirely sure.

"Yes. Even now I imagine his sun barge sailing, he reclining upon it, it upon perfumed waters."

"And where is he going to?"

"He is going to the palace of his dominion," she said.

"Why did this god abandon his creation?" Jasper asked slowly, "Why did this perfection intimately fail?"

"It did not fail, could not fail. He is returning to it after all. And even when my body slumbers finally will I return. Will I be redeemed."

"But you will remember, will you not, being this person now, and he, he will remember being the person he was? Tell me, will he regard you with favour for ending him or favour for waiting to purchase the poison when you could have killed him straight away?"

Jasper, during this conversation, could not tell if he was in earnest over his questions or simply stalling for time. Of the woman's mental state, he had no doubt. Of the danger she posed he had no doubt. But with her story subsuming into himself he too could almost see the paradise sprawling and sprawled across dust seas of a paradise world and their perfume-scented waters.

So even he was not utterly sure of why he spoke.

"It will be enough that he returns," she said, her eyes glazing subtly.

"Tell me, as a final question before we go, if he were

indeed so beautiful why did he never leave, why did he appear and spend his last days in a room like that?"

"Oh, he wished to leave, he told me so, said he was going to get himself together, depart, maybe go elsewhere, go to Cymralis. Think of that, leaving his most loyal servant behind after we spent all our time together, I enduring his voice, his sickening voice, after feeling his thoughts invading my own, spending nights together, he in his room, I in mine, but always listening, listening, lusting thoughts pouring from him to me and I to him. No, it had to be now, he had to be ended and returned now. There was no better time for it. *It had to be now.*"

The last sentence she said with such vehemence it almost shook the man.

Later, she was arrested, making no protest in this.

Her species, her world of origin was eventually touched upon. Maybe it was Astryages or Astreighyn, (thereby perhaps explaining her obsession with the man since both names were so similar,) or something else entirely.

She was not hanged since she wished for this.

She was left to live as long as her years were able.

And the next day after her arrest Jasper went back to work.

But still the thought lingered in his mind of ordinary people who in another life had been gods and lords of light and sun reduced now to this and nothing more.

Perhaps he had not simply come to be?

Perhaps he always was and if she had imagined the same then his own life might have ended in that room, divined upon by what this old soul brings.

CULTURED

I. The Grel Gospel

In the end, Isaaliai was lying there. She had been brought to the morgue and her body left to be discovered like a lost continent, the pathologist upstairs having his meal.

Outside, had she sight anymore, she could have noticed through the small window at the upper edge of the room the sight of feet passing by.

But she had no sight anymore.

Jasper had walked down by now, noticing the translucent body on the slab and the cool shade of darkness to her opened, opaque eyes, the face turned toward the door as if even in death waiting for him to come.

Isaaliai had come here before.

Her body was now interred in a burial plot.

Twice.

This was her third death by now.

Sometimes they came back of course. At first, some had assumed the daughters of Hetemit responsible through their ritual but this was not the case. Nor was it some other magic from a far-off place. The solution had been something else both more remarkable and more terrible.

Yet it was impossible to put it into words.

Jasper had already solved her death once. The first time had been a simple accident. Second however was because of a man.

His name was Grel.

She had been found poisoned in her apartment. It had been simple arsenic, nothing exotic. The suspect had seemed easy to find. Pathetically easy in that he had waited outside her door, waited for the police to arrive.

Grel had been taken by Jasper himself, who offered no explanation for the crime beyond her recent resurrection.

Now she was dead again. And it was arsenic again.

And turning mournful eyes up the stairs he slowly went his way again.

Grel had been incarcerated until his suicide.

Logically it stood to reason if she were dead twice, he was responsible. Jasper would have to search him out.

Manhunts of this type were not a challenge. One of the worst aspects of his task was its often brutal simplicity.

After returning one became a creature of habit. If one were a poet in a previous life their entire personality could be subsumed by this, making one more reckless, or alien.

And if a criminal the poor cliché held.

One would inevitably return to the scene of the crime.

Jasper had simply to wait for the machine to come back one final time.

He had taken up residence in the apartment she rented and came to claim twice. He sat in her chair, and read her books, door to the corridor open. The room was small, barely large enough for five people to comfortably stand in but it was large enough for a young woman or an old detective.

As he sat, he heard soft tattooing of someone on the stairs.

Glancing up once he saw Grel emerge, take one look at the detective and then turn around. Others detectives emerged from the door opposite and stopped him.

"Let's have a chat Grel," Jasper said resignedly.

Grel seemed happy to comply since he had no choice at all.

"Do you deny the murder of one Ms. Isaaliai Hetemiria?" Jasper asked. Grel had been taken to the station and now in an interrogation room sat across the detective.

"I don't deny it at all," Grel said.

"Could you care to explain your murders of the same woman?"

"She had to die. It was the only way to make everything right."

"And what do you base this on?"

"My faith," Grel said simply. And with that, he began to explain.

II. To Love Him is Not to Go Unarmed

"The world is wrong now. Everyone can return. Everyone is afraid of the dark. But if we show them that there is nothing to be afraid of, if we prove it again and again, if we turn people into objects of worship then we will not be afraid of anything at all.

"I saw her die. I saw her return. She could not remember everything. She was like a painting under glass. Imagine a woman reduced to a painting. I had to end her suffering. I knew she suffered and I had to end it.

"You ask how I knew?"

"I knew because anyone who died and lived must suffer. And those who simply appear, what suffering they must go through too. Like you perhaps. Do you not suffer?"

"So, I did the only rational thing and ended her. But it was not enough. She came back again. And I have ended her again. And I have ended myself. I gave birth to myself and ended myself. It is as if I travelled from a point in the future to now just give birth to myself so that I will exist then.

"But you do not see my brilliance.

"What can you do to me? Kill me? I am one of those who can return. As she is. As she returns, I will return to kill her and each time the cycle will go shorter and shorter until I am only her

death, she is only my victim. Nothing else will remain of us detective.

“We will become a piece of art.

“We will become a divinity, like all others. In time those who return again and again will seem like gods performing the same actions forever, never changing, never growing. She will drink from the cup I give her forever and I will give her this cup forever.

“And those who do not return along the wheel will worship us as deities.

“What do you have to say about that?”

After his confession, Jasper left the room. Since the murderer had confessed hanging was to be considered but since death was not sufficient punishment anymore the law was uncertain what to do.

Jasper went out for a walk.

He crossed the river, listening to the children on the banks playing. Grel’s words caught at him now. The Dominion had touched upon something it could not be freed from and in time more would continue to appear, either emerging outright as he had or being reborn as she had.

And all of it because of a singular plague.

The Dominion had little knowledge of disease. There had been a sickness or two but these were few. Europe had stood for two thousand years with not even a single case of a pestilence and this continent had never succumbed to any illness.

But with the emergence of this new sickness had come all that was to follow, including him.

Chameleon disease.

It had become a thing of terror to know that at death one would cease to be, utterly forgotten and unknown. But there had come a cure, or perhaps an immunity in some. For when they fell

rather than being forgotten outright the memory of them lingered long enough for a new life to emerge, or if forgotten still it was conceivable they might come back.

Jasper was one such as this, a man forgotten on a far distant shore newly returned. His old life was indeed utterly forgotten and even those who had known him before would not know him now. It was like being reborn in a new universe, a blank slate without sin or innocence to cloud his new life.

But this allowed some to return repeatedly instead of simply setting to a final rest.

Grel would emerge so long as she emerged, and so long as she emerged, she would never be safe from him until he remained forever gone.

But to kill him would be pointless.

Another plan would be needed, not simply for Grel but for all others like him.

The detective began his final labours.

III. The Trembling Giant

Keti Hurastria Keth was the prosecutor on the case. Considering all facts provided proved guilt all that remained was sentencing. Hanging was his original plan but the convicted murderer had no fear of this.

So it was, sitting at his desk one day, he received an interesting appointment from the detective.

Keth was a cymryeth who had decided the cooler clime of the Dominion was better suited to him than home.

In strode Jasper with a dossier in hand.

"Have a seat," he said.

"Thank you."

"I understand you want us to deal with Grel differently than most."

"Not just him. All killers like him."

"We can't simply change the law."

"The law has to be changed to allow our world to survive."

"And this plan of yours is legal?"

"I spent several weeks going over it point by point. So long as Grel agrees it is legal."

"You do not consider this a cruel punishment?"

"She should be coming back in a few days and if not her then someone else. Grel is convinced he is a god. Gods need to know their place. They are not above the actions they cause. This is not cruel and like I said I'm sure he will agree. He thinks he knows what is going to happen."

"I think otherwise."

Grel was sentenced to death on a cold day in October, but not to be hanged. Instead, he was injected with something. Since he himself believed death was no difficulty to his plans he readily accepted, especially since hanging last time had given him a slight case of vertigo before he went.

So, he lay upon a slab, a man entered, injected him, and left. The room itself was cold, hemmed in, and there was a single door made of glass which Jasper was looking through. Grel smiled then, thinking how easily all this was.

And died.

And then?

Then they brought him back, having restarted his heart moments after its failing.

They waited patiently, Grel himself now in a cell being held until they resolved the matter fully.

'The matter fully' only appeared four days later.

Long before then Isaaliai herself had returned.

Grel waited in his cell for death only to be told an unusual thing happened. Since he died, he should have somewhere else emerged, but he also remained here. Jasper reasoned there could be two Grels now since his old body had only died a moment, and this proved sound.

His shadow was found and since Grel had pled guilty twice it was not difficult to put this second man in prison too.

In the same cell as his reflection.

But not before giving one man or the other chameleon disease.

Imagine watching yourself fall apart a piece at a time, be obliterated as seasons pass, being intimately aware no one is watching, just the two of you alone, same person, one sick, one sickening, and knowing when one dies there awaits something worse than death beyond.

The disease after all worked by making the living forget the dead. But if the living and the dead were the same and one was forgotten so too was the other. No future resurrection now.

And even if Grel had killed himself or killed the other Grel it wouldn't have mattered. There was no one else in the entire world who knew him as intimately as he knew himself. The guards were under orders not to look but only to give them food and none came to visit him.

Those he knew or who knew him wished to do neither anymore.

And so Grel watched himself fall apart and in the last moment ceased to be, utterly forgotten by all, by everyone. Even by Jasper himself.

Yet the method of execution now remained. The living needed only be reflected at death, restored, and then left only with themselves. But only after first having been infected with this cancer eating into their very souls.

And since Jasper could not remember Grel he could not

remember having invented this method of death either, as if it always were, as if the world had always been this way.

Jasper merely sat on a bench in a park one day after having lunch, thinking all was finally right with the world.

Whether it was or not.

GUN COTTON

The ship lay in ruins now, lay scattered behind the man, and in the ruins of it lay his crew. He hadn't time for tears. He had to move forward now. He had to move forward.

Ahead the jungle lay, grey and white shards of trees and leaves clustered ahead, and without quite knowing why he moved toward them.

His own body lay encased in the armour and on three vast insect legs moved forward, his life condensed to a single sphere of metal atop those three vast insect legs. He brushed into the foliage and as he did could almost smell the burning flesh behind him as if even in the ice winds something human remained.

As he moved, he kept shattering trees, turning life to shards of dust without concern.

Backward moved his memories further he went, across the sea of night toward the countries of his home, the names of those who had come here with him.

But the ship lay in ruins now. And he was alone.

Glancing upward there was no moon.

Death remained a possible country for him to inhabit now. And beyond death?

There was nothing beyond death anymore.

As the machine creaked amid the howling ice winds, he thought he heard something whispering his name.

But it was only the wind of course. Only the wind.

Night came on fast feet then, on slender fingers blocking out the light.

No.

For it had been night when they fell and should have remained night now. Outside had come now silence and an impenetrable darkness.

The ice jungle was gone, so too was the tundra, so too all

things.

Only the darkness remained.

For a moment he thought about his teeth, a single broken tooth whose geography he somehow intimately knew. Outside, without sight, he imagined he crawled upon the geography of a broken tooth, condemned to this irregular world without remedy.

But was not this merely a portion of himself?

He imagined himself crawling along this broken continent, itself nothing more than part of him as if he were crawling within himself forever, each iteration trapped in a cycle that could only be broken by the cycle above him.

Or by the cycle below.

He however remained imprisoned forever, without escape.

As he moved, he felt a lingering voice embedding herself inside his mind. This voice, or rather voices, he knew. It was his crew, their speech enveloping him and he imagined if he could have but placed all of them within himself all of them would have survived, each fragment of a soul lost in the labyrinth of him.

He could not even remember each name, could not remember anyone now outside of Ba'Liere and she he recalled because she was his second. Yet each voice spoke back to one of his people and each person he had to save and he crawled along the black abyss, trying to gather up those broken pieces of words a piece at a time but failed and the act failed him and he was left alone in darkness again.

And this was when he made communion with the world.

It had no shape that a mind could recognize.

If one said that the snow was the thing that would be as accurate as claiming the air about one's body was the body itself.

If one said the mountain was its true shape or the extension of its will or the ground or the river or those under-countries beneath the skin of the world or the molten heart

of the planet, if one claimed any of these to be the shape of it, they would be mistaken.

Its existence jutted out into all of this but she was not the world. The world was merely the closest one could perceive in perceiving her. She wandered among the gardens of herself and there encountered him.

In the metal chrysalis lay the broken man.

Stealing into his mind in her lust she fled backward along his life and with each memory of those he knew and loved sped likewise back along their lives as well, through the plague years and the execution rooms and the cold fire.

And without words, without speech, the deal was struck.

Existing alone within the boundaries of herself she knew nothing outside of what she knew. Lacking speech, lacking will, lacking all things but the power to become she occupied her own small burial ground, *but now*, now there was something new.

She reached into him and through him into them, into each of the dead lying scattered upon the frozen skin of herself.

She mended them, tailoring them into the waking world as casually as one might mend a tattered burial cloth, and this she did in payment for what he would give her.

And all who would come after.

He accepted without complaint, without concern.

The chrysalis of his machine split apart and he was reborn in her image, crafted to survive the cold, crafted to become an instrument of her will if she so willed it. He was reborn. He stood amid the shattered, tattered trees, vines singing like choirs in the cathedrals of the winds, and watched silently as the ship departed back into void.

The message now delivered unto them.

The world would remain open for them, for the broken, for the corrupted, for the depraved. As an artist would shape clay she would shape them, and as clay shapes its artist, they in turn

would shape her.

In all this no words were said, no words had ever been said upon this world before. Her servant then was given the choice of what first to say.

He said the name of his god, calling her Irura, which had been his daughter's name.

And passing even into void they heard it, each one who knew their captain would never return with them again.

Ba'Liere alone wept for him.

She knew him.

She knew him as a daughter would her father.

And the message would be given that hell had come, that mankind would give as sacrifice unto the goddess of the snows and the instruments of her will, unto the gardens of her body and the tundra and the cold.

And they would come, yes, they would come, their small multitudes sentenced when the noose and the prison would seem ephemeral and ill-fitting like ragged clothes.

They would come as a thin wave against the shores of the world for all bring their own hells with them and out of hell alone can heaven follow. Or so man reasons in his way.

And what soul, if but once, has not wished to partake of hell?

For out of the thought of hell what is not human?

Hell is always the word against which mankind strives.

So, the goddess walked along the gardens of the cold with him, his skin corpse-grey and his body riddled with ice-blue eyes, as the man silently listened as she sang.

He had no mouth anymore. There was no need for it.

Or so Irura reasoned until the dawning of the seventh day.

ZURVAN

He had a small operating room where he performed his surgeries, especially against those who had no wish to be operated on. One young woman had lost her arms, her legs, her voice, so that when she was found half of her had to be replaced, machines providing her with silver eyes and hands which would never truly feel again.

Khal'yld, in being discovered, knew where he was going. He looked forward to it. It was his fondest hope. So, he went.

Irura would fashion a specially designed form of penitence. If needed her servants could be called, her three dogs of war, but this was rare and reserved for special occasions.

Normally one would encounter lesser demons, some capable of the storm, some of fire, some passing body to body, and some capable of . . . other things. Or if not them there was always the ice worms or the herds or the walkers of the razor wire.

But the goal of each was to become nightmares and force a soul to confront its own worst nature.

Imagine the surprise of Irura to realize Khal'yld relished the thought of his own hell though and was relishing the thought of being taken by the walkers of the razor wire.

He had been in a small creche with others like himself, sadists and monsters, though as the ship descended all others could be seen weeping. Once the coffin-blunt ship touched Irura they too became part and portion of her world and as one they rose and started to move toward the door. Khal'yld was last, intentionally so. He had demanded the right to watch what was going to happen to him happen to all others first.

As a lone caravan of slowly breaking flesh, they entered

the cavern, maw opening wide like some splintered thing of teeth. Each one led the others down into a single chamber and each stood at attention, one before the other as the beast began her work.

Standing atop ten spindling legs, a single violet eye jutting from a smooth and mouthless face was the beast as she crawled atop each of them and set to work.

Ghamsilg felt cold fingers slide along her mind. She was the last, beside Khal'yld himself, standing in that cavern, watching it tending tenderly to the others.

By all logic, she should not have survived. The ice and the cold should have destroyed her body utterly yet their executioner had other designs. It divested something into them, an isolation against the cold, a thought that there was no cold here at all.

Or worse it simply bypassed her ability to feel and she was actually dead, her body its marionette, and her own thought nothing but the last scream of a corpse, last impulse, last dream.

Last delusion.

Perhaps she was nothing now except the thought of once having been.

The creature spindled along through the translucent cavern. By now it had become a dreadful routine. It appeared to be a spider but even a spider would have more mercy than it did.

The man before her whose name she could not remember, had cried. Now he was incapable even of this. Ten razor-wire legs curled along the ice, then upon him, and she saw two limbs wrap about the top of his head and slice the top of his skull clean off. Brown hair shattered to the ground as the beast continued its work.

She saw the rounded body tilt upward, its acari face plunging where the broken wound was as it carried its trophy from the body, having cleanly removed his brain and his entire nervous system which was turning almost instantly to glass.

This it then carefully knitted into the walls, creating a latticework with the others it had already done to. Almost all were suspended along the cavern now, their nervous systems wired together like a grey mosaic, all frozen in a scream.

Then it crept toward her.

And there was nothing she could do, could not even feel its body pressing upon her, its legs scaffolding upon her own.

She did not even feel as bone slid away but mutely saw her blond hair tossed before her and heard her scalp glisten into ice.

Then there was the moment it was truly inside her and she heard the thought loudest, as if for the last time.

It was whispering everything would be alright.

It was saying to her she was almost free of the body which was imprisoning her.

Then her eyes jutted inward as for a moment she was able to look down into her own body now illuminated by the creature and could almost see the inside of her own throat.

Finally, she was carried to the wall, her eyes falling away as blindly it wove her into the frozen lattice of the others and she heard it then, the voices of the others crying out.

But worse.

Worse she heard other voices, inhuman tongues as the cavern lit like a candle illumining hundreds of minds suspended as in amber. And the beast was now the mother of them all, carefully tending her brood perhaps forever. Such as these, after all, were but her wayward children for what seemed to be all time . . .

Yet Khal'yld alone did not cry out. When the beast hollowed him, were she aware of it she would have seen the smile lit along his face and in ecstasy felt himself come home at last. Laid in the mosaic of their minds Khal'yld reached out with an executioner's hand and where he touched decay bloomed inside of each of them.

For all others this was hell.
For he and he alone, this was paradise now.
And the world in seeing this knew something more was
needed to satisfy the man.

The caverns sang.

Each mind riddled into each other's mind creating a single
symphony that jutted from synapses to synapse, a wave
culminating at each end and each point simultaneously. The
purpose of the caverns was to tailor empathy to them. Each one
could not imagine another as another but only an appendage of
themselves to be discarded when the time was right.

Now however there was nothing else but mind.

Imagine a body, each portion with its own thinking self, so
that one could not sacrifice a hand or will a tooth to bleed away or
pluck at an eye. For all these were themselves aware and would
fight back with the fury of any living thing threatened by death.
Yet Khal'yld even in this showed no signs of fear.

On Earth, he had his operating rooms and now the cavern
was his theatre, these were his blocks of marble to carve as he saw
fit.

And so Irura turned its full attention upon him to see
behind the machinery of his thoughts.

Khal'yld was a creature of rare device, a being without
soul or conscience but more he was a being without satiation.

He was a sheer abyss.

No matter what happened to him he desired more. Had he
the time he would have gone from one end of the world to the
other, dissecting each person a day at a time, and when his labour
there was finished would have gone to another world or another,
never feeling any satisfaction in his labours. For it was not the
actions which sustained him but only the thought of them.

And knowing that death now was again a permanent state

he had resolved to storm into hell and reside there.

His logic was reasoned so.

Irura existed to allow the corrupted a chance to redeem themselves. The planet was tailored to create a punishment and allow in time any to escape so long as they sought to make amends. There was no evil so horrific that she would not attempt to cure it, and had. For this hell was designed for each to escape from and in time each did. Murderers would be freed, rapists, thieves, each after going through the labyrinth of her body and each finding their own means of exit.

But until they found the key to their freedom they would remain here, never aging, undying, incapable of sleep, and depending upon the punishment needing neither food nor water to sustain themselves after first arriving here.

As such, so long as one actively refrained from her intentions one could not die and she would not return a life to being until their redemption had been made.

Reasoning so Khal'yld knew he could live forever in this wall, his victims an endless sea of thoughts, each of them monsters in their own right and so torturing them would elicit no sympathy from those back home.

He could become a creature of execution forever, an added layer to her tortures, and if they fled away, if they retreated back to the living lands so much the better. It meant his stay in hell was working, he was aiding the god of this place in her labours with each scar he made.

And there was *nothing* she could do about it . . .

II.

Since he did not sleep, he never knew when it happened.

There were always seconds of unconsciousness and in one of these he was pulled away from his comfortable place of rest into another place.

He had limbs again. He had legs and he was crawling.
He had eyes and he could see again.

The planet loomed upward and the ground seemed so close and he imagined this to be a mistake but then knew it was not.

He was an insect crawling along the ice.

The body was brown and it seemed like a cockroach, the carapace atop the frame clearly bifurcated which should have meant it had wings.

Yet like an actual cockroach, it couldn't fly.

By now he knew the sky was gone.

He was surrounded by countless others, all moving to a single place.

As he stopped thin tendrils grew from the underside into the ice. The tendrils seemed to pore perfectly through the permafrost and he realized what was happening.

He was a seed taking root.

A herd of deer appeared, thin legs rippling along the endless tundra, however, they were translucent, transparent, and lacked eyes. All but one.

At the head of the onrushing thunder of them was a single sighted animal and this creature set her sight on him.

Perhaps she would crash her hooves into him but this did not happen.

Instead, inches from him she stopped.

She turned her head the way certain dogs do when deep in thought then glanced downward where the insects were.

Almost all of the tiny creatures rooted to their spots were then crushed, first by one of the herd, then another, until they were nothing but a pile of broken limbs.

And then just as swiftly the herd moved on again.

Ignoring him.

As he glanced about the ruined creatures began to change.

Several of the broken limbs regained themselves or divided in half as they began to bloom becoming like spiders that rose upward to twice his height. But each was still rooted to the spot, incapable of movement.

Then they broke free and began striding to distant caves on limbs each as sharp as razor wire.

He waited in the cold patiently but no one else came.

If Irura expected this to break him though it didn't work.

Defiantly he imagined all he would do when freed.

Even mouthless, immortal, unable to move still there remained the spark and Irura would never simply edit a mind to obedience. She could create illusions, and tailor certain memories but it was beyond her power to truly change a life.

If being transformed into a cockroach was supposed to humble him it failed. But that was not her purpose at all.

In the middle of the night, he heard again the footfalls of the herd. Glancing up he saw it as a single hoof plunged downward, instantly ending him. He expected to become like the ice spiders striding upon their razor-wire limbs, but this did not happen.

He awakened to darkness and knew that he was in the body of the creature that had killed him.

Dimly perceiving the tundra, he moved on. He could only feel the ice, hear the winds singing, taste the cold ripping at his body and in this state, still alone, he moved on.

Behind him, he imagined the creature was now residing in the body of the ice spider and he had half a mind to return to it and kill it but something prevented this from happening.

Instead, he moved north until he felt the rumble beneath his feet and there emerged the circular grasping form of one of the creatures beneath the ice. He had only enough time to realize the danger before it was too late.

Then he became trapped in this body too.

He waited, how long he could not tell until he felt in the lands above the soft tread of something and reaching up grasped the armoured body of some crustacean. A massive creature, claws ripping at his body he felt as he tried to drag it down only to become the creature and rapidly swim away through the ice leaving the ruined body of his former self behind like a ruined chrysalis.

In this new form, he was invincible, could rip mountains to tattered rags or kill cities had he wished yet this did not amuse him. For he knew there was yet another creature somewhere in the upper limits of Irura.

He trailed it, hunting it, all else being forgotten, and one night in what seemed a thousand years since his first step upon the ice planet he caught sight of the rounded hill of its body and turned finally to fight.

His own body was easily the size of a large building. That which he hunted was the size of twenty buildings laid end to end, a massive ice worm that stormed its way across the northernmost limits of Irura.

The battle was fierce, silver scales torn by claws that seemed composed of permafrost but at last, the ice worm became the new unexplored continent of his mind while the old shell of his body the dying ice worm now occupied.

But even this was not enough.

For there were creatures here yet more powerful, servants of Irura and beyond that Irura herself.

And Irura now the monster could clearly see.

In that uppermost dominion of the north Irura herself appeared, a skeletally thin woman with golden hair and eyes and the ice worm raced ahead to kill her and take possession of the world for himself.

Yet no matter how long he ran or raced still she was always ahead and no matter what the murderer did he could not

give up pursuit of her.

For how long he raced he could not tell but in the massive body of the beast he was already god enough to shatter continents to glass and so it was only a matter of time until he would catch her and end her utterly.

Yet something strange happened longer he raced, tunneling through the ice, his body rough mountains if seen in the distance.

For she seemed to grow larger the longer he pursued her. She seemed to encompass more and more of his sight the longer he ran after her and the sky which no longer existed seemed always closer to him somehow, even though he could not perceive it. It merely felt closer and without words, he could not articulate it better than that.

But this did not matter for his eyes only truly turned to his lawful prey.

Finally, he cornered Irura, she having fled into a cavern, he just behind her, just about to strike when he noticed something then.

There was a slight fissure in the floor of the cavern in the dim chamber and this fissure revealed light. The massive serpentine head lolled down for just a moment to see that light and what he saw broke him utterly.

He was in a room above the chamber where he had been interlaced with all the others. But the ice worm body was supposed to be thousands of times larger than any man. Instead, the opposite had happened and he had not been made aware of it.

Until now.

From the moment he had been an insect upon the tundra to his time now, each iteration had become smaller than the last. The herd animal may have indeed crushed him but he had not resided in that body at all. He had passed to something even smaller than the insect he had been.

And this smaller, sightless body had then moved until caught by some fragment in the snows, itself caught by some small pseudoscorpion and itself defeated by some pinworm.

Irura had shifted his perceptions, inverting them. By now he was no larger than half a grain of sand. Then she revealed her true self to him, revealing each fragment of herself into his soul.

Burning him.

He would never succeed in devouring such as her. He would only spend forever reaching as it diminished, his immortal body shrinking like a cicada each time until nothing was left of him.

He fell then through the fissure and landed upon the razor-wire striding beast as she was tending her brood.

For a moment he imagined himself as her and himself likewise there upon the walls, a circular movement of time, never-ending and never beginning, moving back and forth between these two roles forever.

Or be again that insect carried upon the tundra, collapsed slowly a piece at a time until he was standing inches away from a shape and form so vast even a god could not perceive it truly.

Only the next time she would let him catch her and he would collapse to a shape and form so small then *he would not even be aware of himself*.

Knowing the two fates which would await him Khal'yld took possession of the beast and began carefully tending the brood while a portion of him remained embedded in the walls and began to sing a hymn.

For now, these were only words of course. But in time he would believe the words that he was saying. In time he would believe his labours were all finished and there was nothing left to do, no time left in this world to spend on anything less than one task only.

To never have reason again to come upon Irura.

And whenever he wavered in this goal, he needed only think of all that he had seen, the vast immensities of herself, and how all of her was focused solely and terribly just upon him.

Time had no meaning to her after all.

She created herself and therefore had no finishing.

CITY ON FIRE

*All man's imagination begins in nature and
seems to come from no other source.*

I.

They used to collect echoes of the dead.

The children of the ice would take their time moving amongst herds of grazing things with their thin rippling limbs against the tundra or plunge into the ice oceans where dragons drank their days or listen to the shadows making lich-fire songs against the walls at night, twisting a life into a dirge or cacophony, or less.

They used to collect echoes of dead things.

These echoes would then be carved, and shaped, and one would find galleries of statues, each statue a cry, a moan, or scream. As such the children of the ice were deemed the greatest artists in all of Irura.

This was their penance and why they were made for they were the creation of Irura, born to collect all terror and all fear and condense this unknowable horror to something known.

And in making such things known Irura would then understand and with her the rest of her creation. They were the mirror reflecting horrors which until then were unexplored.

II.

Kly'dhal spent the morning roaming far hills beyond her city. In the distance, the rounded forms of ice worms were seen.

Scales glittered in the cold and she heard the hymnal glistening sound of each scale turning the movement of the beasts into symphonies upon the air. But this was not her prey.

Irura herself had summoned Kly'dhal here. By now Irura had condensed herself into something new, or something old, or

rather something familiar for humanity to understand. Taking the form of a skeletally thin young woman, the world herself whispered to the artist to hunt here.

And so, she did.

Not all the denizens of Irura were condemned after all.

True the planet tailored herself to a place of penitence but this had occurred to give Irura the seeds of larger things. For out of their waking dreams and nightmares came new flesh to clothe themselves so Irura herself could create nightmares of her own.

Kly'dhal was such a dream.

She crossed low hills which grew with each step until she was standing halfway between the world and sky.

Some perceived this to be an inversion of the world below and others could see night. One or two in fact could even note the constellations or name her sister worlds like Kralonoc or Hladolet or the cannibal planet of Ulsariph.

Tonight, the artist however could only see the continents above, a reflection of all things cast against their absence and their opposite.

She strained her ears to listen but only silence remained.

Having nothing else to do then with the ice worms too far to collect their echoes unto herself and no other signs of any other life she craned her eyes upward and beheld.

The inverted sky revealed the city as well.

From her vantage atop the rounded hill the city slid away and was too far to see but in the inversed world above Kly'dhal could note each street and each finger of a building or even the garden at its centre where demons walked, those memories of titanic shadows whose very forms once blocked out the light.

That was when she saw it.

The city in the upper sky began to burn.

At first, it was the gardens. The demons with their lich-fire languages seemed to become obsidian flowers bright with sharp

and silver teeth which then bled outward, drowning each street with flame.

The flames licked at the walls and Kly'dhal watched the multitudes as they were set ablaze, an infinite scream beginning and ending from each voice unto each voice wailing there.

Great rows of serrated teeth ripped at the air and two wolf-stained eyes appeared on either side of a dragon's head as it howled again and then dove backward into the ice.

Women appeared walking on raven feet and suddenly she could not tell what she had seen for the wolf-stained eyes and the dragon's form had not come from the city nor the ice but hovered halfway in the middle of the air.

And the women with their raven feet likewise appeared of a slender oblivion, winnowing between streets and tundra, coming into being if only to shepherd the dying there.

She watched all this, listening to each scream, collating each one instinctively even as she wept.

Then the city became embers blistering into nothing and only the ice worms in the distance were left, silent as a grave.

She then crept slowly from the hill and returned the way she came . . .

She walked in utter silence, each footfall a testament to her courage.

She expected upon the final step to stand in the sepulchre of her city and all her people slain.

But this was not to be.

For the city remained whole.

Entering in, quite without knowing it, she went to a museum of sound and laid down the burden she had carried there.

Each echo she grafted like the branches of a stem, siphoning them into form. Upon the canvas stretched taunt she

laid each sound, a scream become a face, a furnace's heat becomes a swirling triskelion pattern of blue and red and wine-dark white.

She crafted triptychs of immolation, transforming the dead city into a miniature and twisted reflection of the living one.

For six hours throughout the starless night, she worked while the crowds gathered, listening to her shallow breathing in the gallows hall. By the end she was spent and brokenly collapsed herself against the masterpieces haphazardly, perfectly assembled there, still uncertain if the city she had wandered into was the living or was dead.

And Irura crept to her then, still and silent and listening all the while to the screams embedded in the forms of the statues there.

And Kly'dhal asked why she had been summoned to see a city on fire and if the world could envision such as this why this servant needed to bear witness to what the world already knew.

And Irura bent low and explained.

The city on fire was not any city of her dominion.

This was not a reflection of her mind or her dreams.

Rather this was the nightmare of those upon her threshold and so she crafted this in the upper world for Kly'dhal to create, to confirm the world's suspicions.

The city on fire was not a city of Irura or of her making.

The burning city was a city of the Earth.

So saying, Irura picked up her servant and carried her to rest, and out of all creation striding upon the world and in the upper air a boon was granted her at least.

For she was given sleep.

CUULGARTH

The Infinite Sea had drowned by now.

The door had closed, Earth sealed herself away and so only this method remained. The ships first passed the planets they knew, arising first from Irura's hell, finally coming again to the shores of Earth . . .

There had been a city here, had been cities here.

They came to find Earth empty.

The ships probed with slender fingers against the broken continents, where were a scattered remnant of survivors.

Clutching them up, doorways bleeding the air they gathered the survivors and laid them to rest. Imagine watching a city burn and itself but a grim reflection of a hundred equal to itself.

No words were said as they were taken up, nor words needed. Their dreams spoke just as well.

In bright-black halls the last of men, of women, were placed in grey argyle tombs, patterns of twilight flowing back and forth lulling each to an endless sleep.

When Earth was emptied, they listened to the last of the Dominion screaming in recall. Only then when the testimony was finished did the three vessels depart, going into the country of their enemies . . .

There had come an infection into the Dominion.

The Infinite Sea had laid a new thread across an undiscovered world.

In the year 2-21-1-6 of the Dominion calendar a new planet revealed itself, grey unassuming burial plot, and a colony was established there. The colonists were part of some older religion obsessed with the end of time and embedded in the bodies of each

had come the plague . . .

The ships by now relayed what they learned to their god.

The other worlds of the Dominion had no means of reaching Earth without the plague descending upon them too. All they could do was mourn and close the doors of their countries and recognize the unhealing wound as it bled lengthwise into all them.

All that remained now was vengeance.

Far behind them in the cracks and fissures at the floor of primordial oceans there remained some forms of life. In the lowest depths of valleys, one might have found ants shimmering in the half-dark or the bodies of enormous wasps thundering their wings against decaying jungles. One would have observed cockroaches in smoldering corpses of cities or boneless bodies of glass creatures floating atop skins of now nearly empty oceans.

Beyond this, nothing.

There had been nothing larger than a man left upon the shores of Earth and now even those titans were gone from off the face of it.

All that remained now was vengeance.

Ahead their destination.

Orbiting a dim star lay the planet of plague.

The grey oceans were the bodies of them, legions whose touch had possessed and been possessed by those who had crept upon their dominion. The death of Earth was now but a pleasant dream to them.

It was time for them to awaken to the depth of their mistake.

Lich-fire language descended first.

Imagine trillions of black flames emerging in the night, fingers of a storm without end or beginning moving as a stalking predatory thing among you.

Following this there came the storm as portions of the planet cooled to hell and then much lower than that as the three descended and stood in the midst of the murderers.

The oceans of things rose up, grey lattices of bodies pouring forth as Caelcaesalia of Knives transformed her flesh to steel and let the blades of her fingertips slice into them while Tarrant of Serpents let writhe scaled bodies which tore and fed upon them, slicing their trillions away into the maw of his creations.

Then came Sairythcairn of Fire, first of Irura's dogs of war, he who had made the covenant with Irura, he who had named her.

The planet was scoured of life in an afternoon.

The creatures were taken in the maws of blade and serpent's jaw and fire and carried back into the barges of the dead.

Sans teeth, sans eye, sans memory, sans mind were the oceans of the murderers sifted and then each portion of their crimes intimately returned to them.

Finally, messengers came upon the dead continents of Cuulgarth. This had been the name the colonists had given it. Whatever name the creatures had for their planet, if any, did not matter to the dogs of war.

The messengers were summoned and each instructed to go to one of the other planets of the Dominion to reveal that the plague had ended and there yet remained some portion of mankind.

The doors were opened by Irura herself as shadow and storm fled, first to Salcaina and its curling labyrinth city of mourning, then to the shallow seas, the wine-dark canals, even unto the airless void of Hetemit to give witness to the emptiness.

Finally, the three were given pause and allowed to walk upon a continent separate their maker, and for a time, but a short time only, each almost felt themselves restored to what they had

been.

Then they returned the way they came.
All save the Earth which they avoided half in shame.

IV.

The plague had run riot and burned cities to embers but this was not merely their own crime. The colonists had come unto Cuulgarth whispering of the destruction of all things, of the day of judgement when the righteous would be spared and the wicked burned.

And the plague had listened.

Even now deep inside of each of the amniotic oceans of their bodies lay that human stain of retribution, violence not for pleasure or survival but out of the grim certainty alone that this *must* be.

So the plague was carried to the ice skin of Irura.

For judgement.

As for mankind they remained for now in the chrysalis of the grey tombs, weaving their old lives back a thread at a time . . .

Irura for the first and final time came forth in anger.

Never before in Calderspire nor before in the ice caverns, nor even in the days of the tortures of the Republic of Typhon had she come forth in a skin of such rage as she revealed now.

She was the Erydianus that day, the skeleton god of silver spoken of in the myths of the daughters of Hetemit, that devourer of souls from her tower of silence come whom none could stand against her.

The plague she held aloft in her hand and drew from this each thread of the mind of man.

The plague she held aloft in her hand and drew from this each thread of the mind of woman.

All humanity now numbered less than half a city on the plains of Silla. Had all humanity lingered upon those plains and

let the stalking beast devour each breath of them, had each soul lingered there that day and let the breath be taken from each of them than man and woman would be memory and nothing more would ever remain of them.

When Irura finished her labour, when the skeletal hand had sifted the plague, when the peoples of Calderspire watched her standing upon the dais there at the highest height, gazing over the cage she had built, a cage which had been designed to fade and fall away and now was the only true trace of a dead race, when she finished, she scattered them.

Afterward, returning again to the form she loved, her three dogs of war returned with her along the river-road, shimmering like a mirage half-glimpsed by a fever-dreamed eye. The ships were slowly now being returned to pieces of metal held in the shallow grip of time and the crews returning wraith-wise into snow, their entire lives spent in war, hopeful to be extinguished or never recall again the holocaust behind their eyes.

And in far Salcaina after many days the mourning ceased.
The dead had been remembered and recalled.
It was time for the living then . . .

SCORPION

*Each life is a flaw if only seen
from the outside.*

Prologue

Caelraesaljia before that moment had not existed.

There was the vague uncertainty of time before then the moment of conception, then time flowing after into being. Names began to bleed into her then. Arithria, Isariph, Hijraelis, Irijaelis, Hlalym, Karthrajuli . . . each name meant something or was the mosaic of something so vitally important to know.

And there was a further name. Erydianus. This name elicited fear in her before she was aware of eyes or skin or teeth or mind. Then there was the emergence of the world, into the world afterward.

She came to realize she was standing in the middle of a white street like a symphony of ice yet she could not feel the cold. No, more than this. She did not understand there was such a thing as cold or snow or ice or legs or fingers until the hand slipped into her own and she saw the person standing there who must have been there before. Without the woman realizing it.

In the sky, there wheeled a dark shadow.

The woman spoke of this, calling it a *s'gerix*.

The entire language was a series of words she did not know, but somehow, she knew what the word *s'gerix* meant.

It meant dragon.

She was taken then hand in hand into the nearest pair of rooms.

Caelraesaljia sat upon a small stool and before her was a spinner's wheel and within this lay echoes. They seemed like pools of fog or gauze and she absently drew her hand along the bodies of them, making soft moans and cacophonies of words rise

from the corpses of them. And then without quite knowing why or how she began to work . . .

I.

In Calderspire that day they came.

Normally they would have been scattered, some sent to the caverns or others to the tundra where the herds race and roam or a few to the cities of rapists or murderers but today these were reserved for Calderspire.

By now the dogs of war had returned to their places which sat squatting like fatted toads atop the countries of the north. Each would linger in their thousand rooms and spend the next season gazing at one face or another, the smiles of the dead caught in threads of dreams to be recreated here, embedded like cameos into the very walls.

Irura herself laid the mask of Erydianus behind her, allowing the skeletal darkness of silver limbs to brokenly scatter across the river and be lost, hopefully forever. She would wander herself a time after this, creating gardens and jungles of lost human lands, transforming ice to savannas, and even creating lions in her midst and reckonings of whales in oceans she carved out of herself, simply for some remnant of Earth to survive.

Calderspire she would not look upon. Not till her grief and rage were satisfied.

And upon that day the city bled outward like a black wound and the streets spiderlike extended themselves and the walls drew back, mute titans striding forward until ordered by the river and mountains to stop, and when all was in readiness they were cast here and left.

While mankind slept in a tomb city to the south, dreams their only recourse now.

They came, each one incapable of understanding the native tongue. They came without memory and so arrived here

nakedly in streets to be taken by one soul or another, by the h'ralemir and the t'lalymir who were the crafters of echoes and weavers of the cold.

So here sat Caelraesalja before the echoes, herself looking like any human woman while the woman who led her here did not.

For the sculptress Mnaryn had eyes of sapphire crystal, her long and thin fingers extended beyond any human hand and her grin wrapped itself back along her jaw the way a shark's mouth would and her skin was not like any skin a human woman might have had.

Again, names came to her, all save Erydianus whose name was lost and if it had been spoken, she wouldn't remember it.

In other rooms sat other figures, all human, all sitting before a potter's wheel littered with the echoes of words and cries.

And in her room, bare beyond the wheel, the stool, a far table composed of ice, and her companion who stood over her, she gazed over this and continued with her labours. She wove into the fogs of speech and each turning of it along her hands brought back a memory.

Outside Mnaryn went.

She glanced up to see the sky, that there was a sky now. The moon was visible by now and with it the far cannibal planet of Ulsariph. Turning toward the newly minted flesh she sighed.

Calderspire would not be emptied for some time.

True the other places could become new Edens for them and already those of Cymralis or Temaukel made their offerings. But this?

Mnaryn had expected some torturous design, some agony impossible for the human mind to comprehend. She had expected the plague to be burned into glass and the glass shattered to shards, each shard then used to wound the other pieces of themselves.

Instead, the penalty was this.

A potter before her wheel and nothing more than this.

That and her incomprehensibility to understand.

Had Mnaryn wished she could have murdered the plague of course. Was she not a daughter of Earth, had she not the right to enact vengeance? Yet Irura had placed the mark of Cain upon all of them and they were not to be harmed. Her justice, the world's justice toward them would dwarf any torture Mnaryn might comprehend.

So, the daughter of Earth had no choice but to return all the while knowing the man Mnaryn had viciously raped when she was human had perished in fire upon the Earth, and to him she could not even seek amends . . .

II.

Caelraesalja slept.

This was an impossible thing. None slept upon Irura unless the world so willed it. Yet Caelraesalja slept.

She was taken to a bed of snow in the upper room and collapsed as any human would after a day of work.

And she dreamed.

Mnaryn could almost listen to her dreams, the slow tattoo of the end of things that had interlaced into her mind.

There were dreams of fire there. Of that Mnaryn was certain. And in each of the other upper rooms where each of the other humans dwelled so too were there infinite dreams of fire.

Was this the punishment Erydianus wished, a simple dream of fire in a land of ice?

When the dreamer woke, she spoke a few words, half of them in the native tongue, and then returned to the room below and continued to sculpt the echoes into life.

She ate the food provided by the ice which turned into

roasted meat. Of what species Mnaryn did not know.

There was no sign of a greater torture in the world's design than having this prisoner carving into echoes and for the longest time, Mnaryn did not know why.

Then came the day when the carving was finished and the song crafted and laid carefully upon the table. The song had taken the shape of a statue of some young girl and this Caelraesalja gazed at in narcotic awe, then, as if listening picked the body up and went out the door.

Mnaryn following.

As this happened so too it happened in each of a million, million rooms as like a wave they came, moving as one, carrying statues of voices with them travelling along the shoreline, going north.

And the other condemned ones following, uncertain of the punishment in store.

By now the humans could only barely speak the native tongue. This made little sense to Mnaryn though, for why would Irura deny them speech? Was it not better for them to know the language of the world? Why keep them ignorant in any way?

Caelraesalja was but a small cog in the larger machine of bodies yet still in turning back she could see her guide behind her and almost smiled at her.

And then quite suddenly all stopped.

Before the wave was summertime.

The ice fled and left behind an entire valley of summer. Without knowing it they ran, a plague of bodies falling forward into the green grass there along the wine rivers drinking warmth.

The condemned ones followed, still uncertain.

The valley extended beyond perception. Irura crafted it to jut lengthwise across the river, transforming murky-grey waters to a perfume-scented oasis and had transformed jungles of ice to orchards of apple trees, as all the time the statues slipped

precariously almost out of hand . . .

It was Caelraesaljia herself who first noticed the beast, a thing of thorns that crept from under a rooted log. She had no word for it exactly. It strode on thin legs and had a tail barbed like a bright flower and two pincers before a dagger-smooth face.

Without knowing it Caelraesaljia picked the armoured thing up, gazing at it, eye to eye before it struck.

There was the merest pinprick against her skin and she cried out and in doing so let slip the body of the girl along the grass, shattering it into one cry and then another as if all the weeping of a lifetime had been condensed to that lone cry.

Then another piece of fog fell followed by another, another.

There in the perfect valley of summertime came forth the wail as of a trillion voices crying, all from out the origin of a scorpion's sting. But this was not enough.

Caelraesaljia knew herself to be human. By this day leg and arm, teeth, eye, and hand were known. But when the wail crept up suddenly her eye instinctively turned toward the river as did countless others and those who could not the air itself became as a shimmering mirror, as if winds were vindictive only towards them.

And when she turned toward the river looking at her reflection, she saw it.

Her body was a plague.

Her face did not exist, nor arm nor leg. Nor had she hand or teeth or heart. A single granule of the plague extended into the size of a human being granted human senses with no way for such senses to be and then granted a human mind with no way for a human mind to reside in such a gelatinous, amorphous thing.

The dark body of the plague turned away in agonizing disgust as did all others, their human minds recoiling at what they

saw but as they saw it they transformed further. No longer could they hear the alien tongue of their guides.

Now s'gerix had bloomed to dragon. No longer would they hear the words of any native of hell as anything but that which they might comprehend and in so comprehending understand.

As all this happened the valley burned away, grass licking at the wailing cries of children and old men and women, water settling into the furnace heat of an inferno as if tainted by blood.

All this they saw as they saw themselves become again the plague. As they did, they returned the way they came . . .

III.

The plague reclined into the woman's bed and slept, oblivion overtaking her then.

In dreams again there came the fire and the human-plague, the plague-in-human, recalled that the scream she carved had been of a little girl she alone had slaughtered in the city of Ottawa before returning to the summer oceans of her home.

When she awoke, she had taken upon herself human skin and now she knew the language of Mnaryn.

But for the time no words were said.

Instead, she returned to the potter's wheel where another collection of fog and mist had gathered gauzelike, pooling about like an ocean waiting to give birth to itself.

And hands began to fold the cries to the shape of a proud young man she had slaughtered whose own cry was the last bleak act he had. For days she laboured and built again the statue, trying to forget but incapable of forgetting.

Then the night and morning and multitudes out walking toward the valley of the summertime.

By now only Mnaryn followed, the others understanding and not wishing to see more.

The vale was built for them again, again they could dance or fall amongst the grass, and again Caelraesaljia noticed the small beast creeping from the rotted log and the compulsion to reach down her hand and pick it up again.

She seemed compelled, there was no other way, so she did.

Then again came fire, then their reflections back into plague and the slow march homeward leaving nothing behind them but the darkness which they gave and which gave them meaning in those hollow lives of theirs before.

Another night, another day, another victim, another statue, another walk, another valley, always the same.

Always leading to the scorpion in the grass and her picking the blunt beast up without ever knowing why, always leading back to the shape of the plague of which she was.

How many victims could a plague have?

How many lives can one illness claim?

Was she responsible if another of her kind slaughtered, if another fragment of death embedded itself beneath a living skin? For though the victims were hers they were also everyone's and since she was a product of human thought it was as if she were likewise seeking atonement for herself.

For forty days in the summertime, their labours continued thus, always returning to the same vale, each of them being given a single taste of the wine warmth of a good day before blistering into embers and to ashes and to less.

By now the condemned ones had ignored this yet Mnaryn could not.

It was not because Caelraesaljia deserved some pity or mercy nor because the punishment was unequalled to the crime. But each moment on that single day repeated forever and forever Caelraesaljia wished not to reach down, not to pick up that blunt beast, and this one element of coercion Mnaryn could not stand.

So, on the forty-first day of the summertime, she went with

the others, walking beside Caelraesaljia and the statue of an old man in her hands, and then again there came the valley, again there came the wine rivers and again there came the scorpion from beneath its rotted log Mnaryn crushed the creature beneath her heel.

She half-expected some punishment perhaps, some wrath from the dogs of war or the thunder of Irura's voice condemning her to a worse fate than she already had.

But nothing happened.

The multitudes glanced about and realized no further torture was coming. The summer valley remained. The wine rivers remained. Caelraesaljia turned to Mnaryn once and then sat upon the rotted log and began uncontrollably to weep. So too did each of them, mimicking some human thing.

The cry went up as incense from the vale moving on forever like the bright flower of some barbed thing right into Calderspire where it was heard by those who dwelled there.

And each in Calderspire began to weep as if for the first time in forever, as if the weeping would never, ever stop . . .

BAALIS

*Sunset and the end of things
they are the same.*

I.

In the tomb city of the south, they dreamed. In grey argyle tombs, each chrysalis preserving one, they dreamed.

Beyond in all the northern countries far above them rode their multitudes, each given form and shape a season and then so often changed. It was as if the ice itself were nothing more than the dream a god might make, and being the shape of a god's dream one couldn't tell when the logic failed or fell.

Children of the ice would sometimes become weavers of echoes and the razor-wire children of Caelcaesalia would emerge into the slender shapes of women with fingers barbed like scorpion flowers as if bred and born for war.

Even the cities of the murderers would shift lengthwise from squat and rounded towers to pillars slender as thorns and rooms once bare would be given the luxury of palaces.

And far beyond the blinded herds one day they might become as dragons skimming the sky or find again hands and eyes and voice to make amends from, or tears to cry.

But all of this, each life suspended taut here was reserved for only a short duration in the cage, and no one expected or was it expected of them to be punished forever.

Each knew in time they would be freed upon the shores of Earth. Each one knew or had known, until that day.

In the grey argyle tombs, each chrysalis preserving one solitary occupant, mankind slept.

It seemed as if a fire-wraith stumbled through the snow.

In life her name was Athaliah, or at least had chosen that name.

Behind her lay the colony on Cuulgarth rebuilt which had been lost in fire and storm.

Irura in bringing the plague to herself had likewise given back the memories of each of them and so she was here, even as she was gone.

Before in the days when the Dominion was certain beings could return after death.

But the chameleon disease had shifted itself and even before she had departed Earth that channel of escape was closed and death was only followed now by death.

It seemed as if a fire-wraith stumbled through the snow.

Ahead was seen herds thundering soft bodies into glass, the slow rhythm of destruction and creation remaining here intact.

She expected she could go there, accept her fate, and die but at the worst moment, the wind caught up and drew her back taking her from the fields of execution into her life again.

Weeping as she went.

The messengers had come by now.

Cymralis and Hetemit, even far Temaukel and Salcaina had given to Irura the knowledge she desired. With Earth's door closed the condemned would need a new Eden to return to and each had given voice that a portion of hell would be their own.

The murderers were welcomed beside the wine canals and the thieves could be placed in Temaukel as they wished.

Sadists, murderers, the contrite monsters could all step foot upon Salcaina while Hetemit was reserved for crimes impossible for most to understand.

Each of the condemned need not be human anyway and there were inaldi-snail patterns on the backs of certain grazing beasts or soft raven tread of daughters of the snow but for the time at least it was only their actions that would lead them to their destinations. In time they might return to their former origins

though.

And all the while mankind dreamed in the southernmost city of the world.

Sairythcairn of Fire had departed for a day.

He wandered in the ruins of London and Paris and the blackened cities of Ottawa and Aisarna. With him went a few daughters of the snow who crafted storms along the ocean like children as yet unborn.

Since Earth was emptied it was the same as hell and so Irura had allowed some of the condemned a chance to feel again the old familiar continents of home. But only for a day.

Beyond the ruins, he wandered through the deserts, strode into ancient Ur and Parthia, and recalled the ancient ziggurats that had risen to the skies. For a time, as a god considers time, he wandered in the thoughts of each of the endless sons and daughters of mankind who had laboured and built their ancient empires, each a shard of gold wounding its own self until replaced by other blades, themselves imagining all that came before as prologue only while their story was the only one which mattered.

Had he wished he could also have wandered across Cuulgarth but there was no point. The wounds he had laid there had ground deep and where Sairythcairn imagined he saw a panther stalking the crippled streets of Ur not even a remnant of life remained on the face of the grey planet.

When he had wandered long enough, he returned the way he came taking those daughters of the snow with him in the shadows of his wings and carrying them all away, as if Earth were but an afterthought.

And nothing more.

Athaliah would not leave.

Several creatures of the plague had decided their punishment should never end. Where murderers passed and scattered to Salcaina given new skin to wear Athaliah said she would never leave.

Was it the human soul in her to make her desire punishment or was it the plague being already damned by the touch of human things?

And who would take the children of the plague?

But still Athaliah would never leave and being a creature of law Irura could not simply make them.

Their punishment would end when they desired it, having done enough to wound themselves back to normalcy. Their home was gone and Earth with it and between the death of two planets those children of the plague decided Irura would be their new home. They could suffer forever in their comfort and their ease.

And all the time mankind in its tomb city dreamed.

And what could Irura do? They had endured the vale and seen a country burn. They had listened to the cries of their victims and knew the horror of their hands. They had laid down beside still waters and would never again seek to end life or hope and were they merely human or were they merely disease the same would be true of them.

There was nothing left to prove in them remaining here.

It was time for them to leave.

So it was that death entered into Irura for the first time.

II.

Calderspire remained their sanctuary.

Mnaryn and the others had gone by now.

In listening to them and their cries and having known what had befallen the Earth of their home they had been gathered like gall and scattered to lay pieces of humanity across the farther shores.

It had seemed a mercy in a way.

So Mnaryn now stood in a labyrinth city of Salcaina and her name had been placed in the lottery.

Being redeemed was not the same as never living again and life on Salcaina depended upon the chance to die at another's hands so knowing her days were numbered or that of her would-be murderer Mnaryn breathed fully and began the game again.

Yet Calderspire remained the sanctuary of them.

Athaliah that day, like any other day, began the litany of remembrance. The colonists had believed that the end of creation would come and the just rewarded and the villains destroyed and so it was that the names of the righteous would be preserved.

So, now the living were damned, and the dead the righteous only. So, the litany was for those gone never to be returned.

The streets were littered with people, each of them chanting the same names. Had Athaliah wished she could have described the young girl under glass in her mind but everything about her was about the end.

It was as if the girl had only existed to be destroyed, as if belief in the end was the only thing that mattered. It did not matter that the girl had been twelve or that an old man had had his hundred or that some had been miserable or bland or uninteresting or depraved.

So long as they were dead, they were deserving of more respect than Athaliah whose god was silent now and forever while the god of the world was active and awake and focused solely upon her damnation.

Even when Irura said this was not the case.

So, the litany of the dead occupied the living mind.

She first felt the pain by the twelfth hour of the day just as the sun was at its highest point.

A storm lit in the distance and the daughters of the storm were singing. Ice worms were making their rounded hills and a dragon was seen careening against the almost screaming sky.

It seemed an ordinary day. But still, she felt the pain.

And she was not alone.

Many of them described a subtle agony and hoped that this was some new torture to cripple them by.

One would see them half-hopeful in their terror wanting to be punished. Had Irura designed a plague to carry them all away, were their bodies now the continents for some new conqueror?

By the second day as Athaliah arose, she vomited.

It was a sickening feeling in her body and she expelled the poison well. So too fell the others in their sickness then.

In the logic of Irura time had no meaning of course.

One could be embedded in ice, that grey mosaic of minds and what would be a moment would seem an eternity. Since sky was but an extension of her will day and night were simply what they were when she remembered them.

So, nine hours or nine months could well have been the same.

After a certain time, prespecified by Irura, when Athaliah's body had swollen in its decay, when her craving for the food of the dead had grown disproportionate to all else, when the women of Calderspire as one imagined the parasite in their flesh was meant to rip itself free and leave them as bloody piles of bodies left freezing in the cold, Athaliah screamed.

The pain had grown so much that she could not imagine anything else.

In bare chambers the men clustered, expecting the women all to die and then as one death eluded them and instead each of them gave birth.

In that time, never to be repeated, children first appeared upon Irura.

Were they truly human or of the plague or something Irura had created whole cloth or were they something else too horrific to name?

It didn't matter. The children were cold.

The children of the plague had been rendered immune against the freezing touch of the world's will but these infants were not so fortunate. They were beginning to harden like glass and at just the moment when they would die summer bled into Calderspire then.

As one they left the bare rooms carrying their children with them and before them at the gates of Calderspire the door of the Infinite Sea opened, meant to take them elsewhere.

And as all eyes fixed upon this at one end of the city at the opposite end the cold stalked like a beast returned.

There was nothing else to do but leave unless they wished all their children to die.

So, they left, Athaliah the very last with the infant cooing at her breast, angry to be denied her justice.

Then in looking at her daughter knew there were other kinds of punishment. The girl could well have been the girl she knew in another life. And Athaliah could only ever atone by being the mother this infant now expected only of her.

She left, going elsewhere, taking life with her in her hands.

UNFINISHED WORLDS

*What we leave behind
is only what we are.*

I.

In the southernmost city, the dreamers were woven together and out of this there came the Earth.

At times only a single life was freed and all others were frozen as if pinned under glass, museum pieces to be observed by strange and unnatural denizens wandering through the night.

This freed life would be given the chance to recall everything for a time.

The daughters of Hetemit were adapts of this art and Irura in knowing so many daughters of Hetemit had learned the craft as well. So, each of the survivors was given the chance to lay their testimony here then fall into oblivion a season and let another take their place.

When finished, when each fragment of the Earth had been gathered up the dreamers as one were freed.

II.

Earth was opened and they without knowing it returned.

On far Cymralis and in the jungles of Falmer messengers ran and told them that humanity had returned. Had any wished in that moment they could have let the remnants perish.

Instead, emissaries were sent to where the crippled Dominion had begun.

But the Earth had been emptied and left barren so if humanity returned, they would return in agony.

If they could see the devastation or recall.

Rather, each was tailored now, edited, undone and redone, leaving the self but taking away the cruelty from their eyes.

For the ruins of Ottawa or Aisarna seemed no ruins now.
In the rivers there swam fish, in the sky there flew birds.

The death of Earth had seemed a dream and now each was
awakened back into the normal ways of things.

In time the cities would indeed be rebuilt. In time the
murderers, rapists would be welcomed home. In time even the
children of the plague might come and lay their grief upon the
shores of ember, but for now, it was enough that the illusion held.

That the Dominion had never fallen.

Of that, those of Earth were intimately assured.

And in time the skies would be filled and the oceans home
again to leviathans. But the creatures of air would be from Falmer
and the beasts of the sea from Temaukel and the insects come
from the scarlet fissures of Salcaina, leading into the black heart of
the stones.

In time perhaps even the human form would be lost and
none would notice it. In time the mask of raven or of scorpion
would be the same as the face beneath it. Perhaps in a thousand
years, new bodies would blossom forth.

Finally, a fire-wraith woman emerged among the exiles.

She seemed the same as each of them and yet she was not
for she had been created from the snows.

Shepherding the lost exiles to their homes the demon led
them back the way they came and if one or another struggled to
remember the way the woman was there to guide them and find
the right words to say while all the continents beyond slowly
healed from their decay.

And with her went the others, shadows with their lich-fire
languages or collectors of echoes and all of them meant to
shepherd the sons and daughters of Earth a time, as any would a
helpless isle of sheep. And far away on the world of her own self
Irura was content.